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RANCH ROMANCES

25c

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

FIRST APRIL NUMBER

FEATURING

RAINBOW WRANGLER
by Lloyd Kevin

RANCH WAGER
by Frank C. Robertson

LOOSE FALSE TEETH?

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30th Year
OF PUBLICATION

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RANCH ROMANCES

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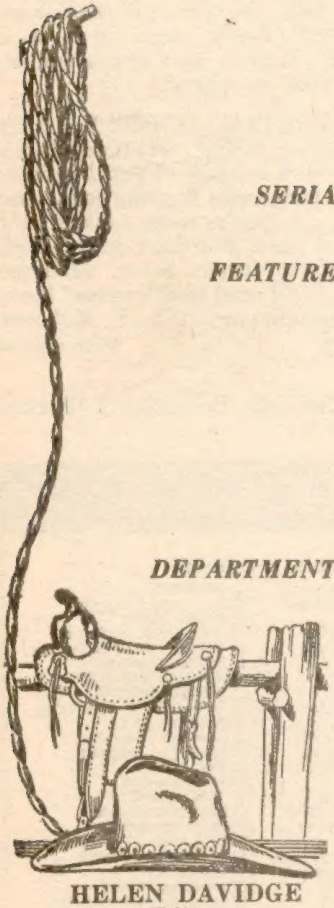

HELEN DAVIDGE
Editor

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In Japan

Dear Editor:

I have been reading your magazine for quite some time and find it very enjoyable. I am in the Air Force and at the present stationed in Japan. I receive very little mail and would like to send forth a plea for pen pals between the ages of 17 and 25—female. I am 21, 5'10" tall, brown hair and brown eyes, weigh 170 lbs. I like sports of all kinds. Horseback riding is my favorite.

A—3c CARL E. EDWARDS AF19404674
6 Trp. Carr. Sq. Box 271, APO 704.
%PM San Francisco, California.

One In A Thousand

Dear Editor:

Will you make room for a lonely girl's plea for pen pals? Your magazine is doing a great job, and I know there are thousands of pen pals all over the world who can thank you for your department. At least I am one of those thousands. I have plenty of time on my hands, while I'm getting rid of T.B. So write, please; I promise to answer each letter.

RUTH CHASTAIN
Fresno County Hospital
T. B. Division Anx 1
Fresno, California.

College Girls

Dear Editor:

We are two business-college students who would like some pen pals. Margret has brown hair and brown eyes and stands 5'4". She likes to dance and roller skate. Evelyn has brown hair and brown eyes and stands 5'1". She likes to write letters and listen to hillbilly music. Anyone is welcome to write and all replies will be answered.

MARGRET YAUORASKI
545 Madison Ave., Jermyn, Penna.
EVELYN FUGA
615 Madison Avenue, Jermyn, Penna.

Student Nurses

Dear Editor:

We would like this letter printed and as soon as possible in your RANCH ROMANCES magazine, of which we read almost every copy. We are student nurses and are both a distance from our own homes. We find writing letters is a wonderful way to pass free time and a grand hobby. We are both 18. Karen is 4'11", has brown hair, green eyes and weighs 118. Joyce is 5'2" reddish-brown hair, brown eyes and weighs 110. We both enjoy all kinds of sports and promise to answer all letters, also exchange snapshots. Would like to hear from guys in the service and anyone between the ages of 18 and 25.

KAREN DYMOKE, SN
JOYCE PUTNAM, SN
St. Margaret Hall
110 West Idaho Street
Boise, Idaho.

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 29 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Ex Sailor

Dear Editor:

I have been reading RANCH ROMANCES for quite some time and enjoy it very much. I have been in the Navy for two years and I have not been receiving very much mail. My favorite pastime happens to be writing. I would be more than glad to answer any mail. I am 21, light red hair, blue eyes, 5'11" tall, weight 195. I like bowling and fishing. Please get the old pencil and paper and drop me a few lines.

TOM C. GARRETT
SHIP REPAIR UNIT 4
U.S.N. Minecraft Base
Charleston, S. C.

All Over The World

Dear Editor:

Could you please include my name in the Our Air Mail column? I am very keen on having pen pals all over the world. I will promise to reply all the letters without fail. My hobbies are stamp collecting, reading books, riding horses, hunting, fishing, swimming, etc. My age is 18, and I am 5'4" tall. I do hope to hear soon.

TONY ARNOLDA
Galmapalla Estate
Marspatha, Kurunegala,
Ceylon, India

Has To Be Shown

Dear Editor:

I'm from Missouri, so you've got to show me that you'll print my plea for friends. This is my first try at Our Air Mail, though I've written to several guys and gals who had made the team. I'm 6' tall, weigh 195 lbs., black hair, and brown eyes. I love all sports. I'd like to hear from gals and guys from 18 and up. Please keep my box full. Will exchange snapshots.

JOE ARMSTRONG
Box 972
Central Station
St. Louis 1, Missouri

Short Request

Dear Editor:

I would like to receive a lot of letters from American and Canadian boys from the ages of 16 to 30. My age is 15. I promise to answer all letters I receive.

KATHLEEN MITCHELL

21 Station Park
Larga Fife, Scotland

Sounds Real Good

Dear Editor:

I am a single young man, and desire some female pen pals. I am 6' tall, and weigh 200 lbs. I have black hair, blue eyes and a ruddy complexion. I will be glad to exchange pictures.

ORVILLE SMITH, JR.

548 Main St.
Kansas City 6, Mo.

Only GI's Need Reply

Dear Editor:

I wonder if you would be able to find just a small place in your magazine for me? I would like to have letters from only boys in the Navy, Air Force and Army. I promise to answer all letters. My hobbies are playing the piano, singing, and many others. I am 15 have long golden hair and dark brown eyes. I will be grateful for letters from boys in the service.

MARY LARSON

Hagensborg
British Columbia
Canada

Lonely Girl

Dear Editor:

I'm a lonely girl and would like very much to hear from the service men and also some girls. I'm 26, 4'11" and weigh 120 lbs. So come on, boys and girls, and swing some letters my way.

CORA HETZELL

Yamhill, Oregon

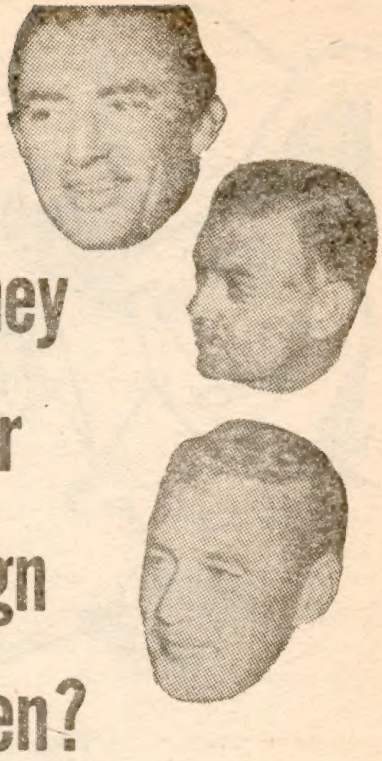
Likes To Eat

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely girl from the state of Texas, and would like very much to write and receive letters from people all over the U.S.A., also in the services. I am 16 years old, have blondish hair and deep blue eyes. I am 5'2" tall, and weigh 106 lbs. I have many hobbies, such as reading and eating; my favorite music is popular songs; I like to go to parties, movies, on picnics and horseback riding. I am a sophomore in high school and my favorite subject is English. I hope I hear from many nice people, and I will exchange snapshots with all you guys and gals and servicemen too.

ANN RICHARDSON

210 Cordell
Houston, Texas



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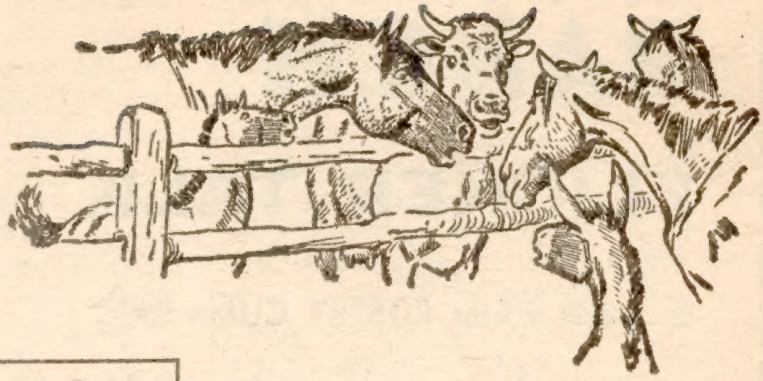


PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found them. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

IN OSHKOSH, Nebr., a little boy who'd watched his father plant seeds and get vegetables, planted some chicken feathers in order to raise some chickens.

IN SPOKANE, Wash., a man with a black eye was asked by the judge whether his adversary was in jail. "I don't think so," he replied. "He was a policeman."

IN FORT WORTH, Tex., there's a rattly jalopy cruising through the streets with a sign on it saying: "For Sale! Will Gift Wrap."

A RESIDENT of Los Angeles received a letter recently, without any delay, addressed to "Smogtown, U.S.A."

IN MOCK COMBAT exercises in Fort Lewis, Wash., three wary infantrymen dropped a load of firecrackers on what they thought to be an enemy sentry. The object of their advance turned out to be a huge black bear. Bear and infantrymen retreated hastily in opposite directions.

IN ALBUQUERQUE, N.M., a city water truck went out to sprinkle the dusty streets —and got bogged down in mud from the heaviest rainstorm in six months.

LADY OUT IN YAKIMA, Wash., walked into a hospital and complained she hadn't been feeling well since a fall a week before. Examination disclosed a fractured skull, broken left ankle, some broken fingers, and scalp cuts and bruises.

IN DALLAS, Tex., a minister found his new church had been broken into. Nothing was missing, but someone had left seven stoves—all in working order.

FROM THE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE of Oakland, Calif., comes the report of a man who went there to live out what his doctor called his last days —73 years ago. Recently he celebrated his 103rd birthday.

IN RENO, Nev., a holdup man impatiently slapped the face of a woman parking-lot attendant who was slow in cleaning out the cash drawer for him. Riled, the weaker sex representative grabbed him, tossed him over her shoulder and dumped him in a mud puddle. The poor robber beat a very hasty retreat.

IN TULSA, Okla., police received numerous calls about a body lying in a street, and investigation disclosed a dressmaker's dummy in khaki shirt and trousers. Irked, they're waiting to see who comes to retrieve it.

COMPTON, Calif., merchants have installed loudspeakers on lampposts in the shopping center—to soothe and entertain harried shoppers.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

by movie editor ROBERT CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

ROSE MARIE

Filmed in color and CinemaScope, MGM'S revival of this classic combines passion and intrigue with real humor

IF YOU EXPECT a classic to have a long gray beard, go to see MGM's new version of *Rose Marie.* The show is about to celebrate its 40th birthday—it charmed America long before most of its present stars were born. And yet with all its brand-new trimmings, it's as bright and beautiful as next summer's bathing suit.

If you think an adventure story can't be really exciting when it's teamed with music, *Rose Marie* will surprise you. Here's a story to make your spine tingle and songs to make your heart dance. I'll bet its songs will be on the hit parade, even though our dads used to whistle "The Song of the Mounties," and our moms used to trill the "Indian Love Call."

Ann Blyth plays the title role, the best singing part of her career so far, and one of the best any actress is likely to get. There's Howard Keel as Sgt. Mike Malone, the pride of the Canadian Mounties, who adopts Rose Marie when her father dies. The only way he can think of to manage the little wildcat is to treat her like a recruit and subject her to Mountie discipline. Soon Rose Marie is leading a Mountie's life—violent calisthenics, rifle practice, riding routines and all.

You can see what we mean when we say it's a part for an actress to dream of—the most becoming background for a girl singer is about a hundred men.

Rose Marie thrives on the rugged outdoor life, and soon every man in the troop is in love with her, including, reluctantly, Sgt. Mike. But the sergeant, fearing the Mounties will lose interest in getting their man because of too much interest in getting their woman, sends the girl to live with a trading-post family.

After a few months in town, learning to be a lady, Rose Marie is even more devastating to the Mounties' affections, but by this time she has found a love of her own. Fernando Lamas plays this part of Jim Duval, a fur trapper with a rather unsavory reputation, who has already won the heart of an Indian maid—against the will of the chief of her tribe.

The Indian girl, Wanda, is played by Joan Taylor, who during her brief movie

career has found herself typed in these parts. But Joan doesn't find it monotonous.

"Just because all the girls I've been playing are Indians doesn't mean they're all the same," says Joan. "Wanda, for instance, is a really complicated character. She's the villainess of the story, and yet the audience must feel sympathy for her and for her lost love."

Because of Wanda's jealousy, Rose Marie innocently becomes the center of a storm of passion and intrigue. When the chief is murdered, Mike has to hunt down Jim, the only logical suspect. But Rose Marie, remembering the hatred in Wanda's eyes, has her own suspicions. She appeals to the troop of men who love her to save the man she loves.

As you can see, there're plenty of thrills and mystery in *Rose Marie,* and there's plenty of humor, too, supplied by Bert Lahr and Marjorie Main, as funny a team as the movies have ever put into double harness. Bert Lahr can be pretty funny without any help from anyone, as when he sings "I'm a Mountie Who Never Got His Man," but paired with dead-pan, gravel-voiced Marjorie, he is really hilarious.

There's dancing in this adventuresome musical too, notably a big production number called Totem Tom Tom, in which Joan Taylor dances so authentically that you'll see why Hollywood insists on making her an Indian maid.

Few musical companies go on location—usually the studio sound stages provide the backgrounds for song and dance routines, and whatever plot the movie boasts. But the cast of *Rose Marie* had to brave not one rugged location, but two. Part of the show was filmed in the Canadian Northwest, at Jasper Park in Alberta, and another part was filmed at Mammoth Lakes, Calif. So some of the mountains you'll see are Canadian Rockies and some are High Sierras. Frankly, I can't tell a Rocky from a Sierra.

All I know is that they're both magnificent, and both of them are filmed in color and CinemaScope.

Ann Blyth plays Rose Marie, and Howard Keel is a Mountie

HOWARD KEEL

A Big Man—All Ways

JUST ABOUT the only concession Howard Keel made to a movie career was to change his name. He was born Harold Keel, and when he was told that wasn't a good name for lights, he thought it over for a while and obligingly changed it. He told the studio that he agrees that the old name wasn't much good, but the new name would be much better. What the studio said about this sweeping concession isn't recorded.

Anyway, he's doing all right with that monicker. One of the top stars on the MGM lot, he is cast in its biggest, plushiest musicals, like *Annie Get Your Gun* and *Rose Marie,* and he's also called upon when there's a nice fat dramatic part for a he-man, like in *Ride, Vaquero* and *Desperate Search.*

Howard was born in Gillespie, Ill., but he grew up in Los Angeles. Even though he lived so close to the studios, he never thought of a movie career. He was a big guy, who expected to make his way with his muscles.

In school he played end on the football team, center on the basketball team and first base on the baseball team. After he'd graduated he went to work at the aircraft factories on the West Coast.

And that might have been Howard's career, except that he liked to sing while he worked, and his fellow workers thought he was great. One of them heard about a singing competition for a scholarship, and suggested that Howard enter it. He did, but without much confidence, and no one was more surprised than he when he won.

The scholarship wasn't the end of his hard labors, however. He went right on working at the aircraft factory, while he studied at night. And even when he got a part in a show at the Pasadena Auditorium, it didn't pay him enough for him to give up his job. But that part led to others, all over the country, and finally he arrived in New York where he played on Broadway as Curly in the famous *Oklahoma.* When the musical went to London, Howard went with it, and it was in England that he played his first movie part.

Hollywood is notoriously farsighted. They couldn't see Howard when he was right under their noses in Pasadena, but when he was in a British picture the studios sat up and took notice.

His first part was in *Annie Get Your Gun* for MGM, and the rest, as Howard says, was easy.

He has been married for four happy years to Helen Anderson, a dancer he met in *Oklahoma.* They now have two little girls, aged 3 and 2, and fancily named Kaiya Liane and Kirstine.

He has always had one crusade—equal rights for tall men. He claims that big guys (he's 6 ft. 4 in.) are constantly bumping their heads on doorways, are always uncomfortable in normal chairs, and never get a good night's sleep in standard-sized beds.

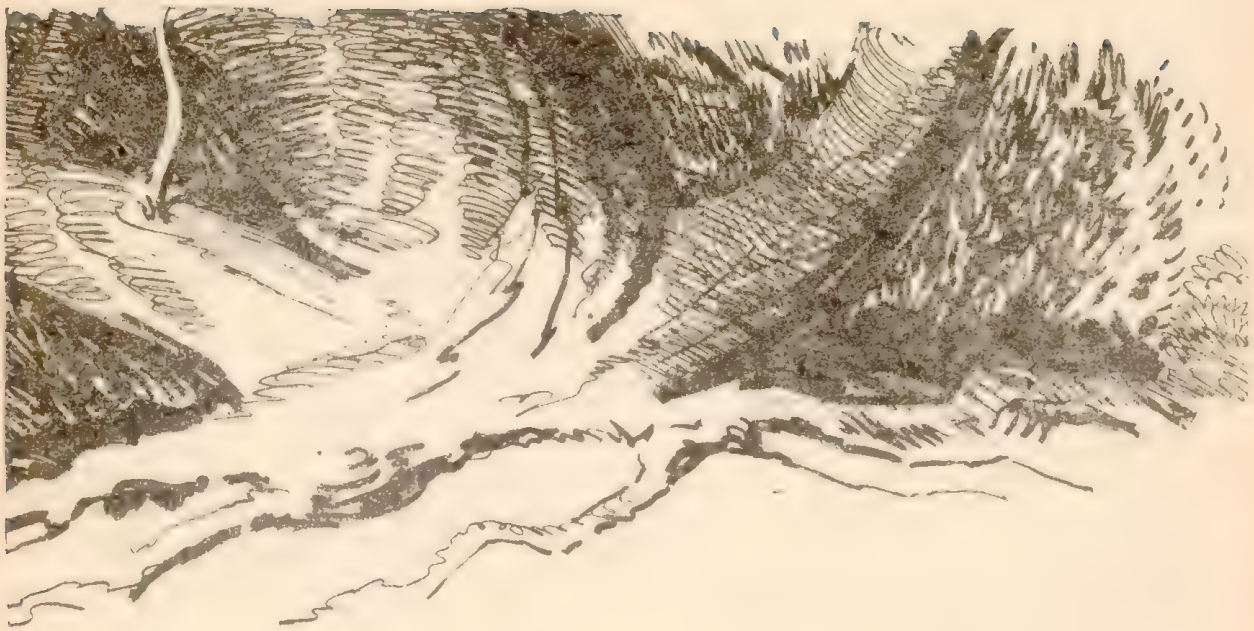
Howard is not a really militant fellow, however, and his crusade has gotten nowhere, except in his own home. There every piece of furniture was designed by Howard himself to accommodate people of generous stature. His wife, Helen, is very pleased with the results, and finds her king-sized furniture perfectly suitable for average-sized people, too.

She gave up her dancing career with no regrets when she married Howard, and she doesn't even mind that his professional life is left behind when he comes home from the studio every day.

(MGM)

A slight change in name meant a big change in careers

RAINBOW



THE FLOOD was an act of God—but the acts of desperate men carried much more threat to Mart and Alda

MART WOLFORD tied a yellow slicker behind the saddle and reined his sorrel gelding down the mud-deep southeast stage road that took him finally to the railtown of Billings, Montana Territory.

Mart's first errand in town was to buy a new pair of boots. Grimacing, the dapper clerk in the fawn colored vest wrapped Mart's muddy brogans in a new shoe box and Mart wore the high-heeled ready-mades out into the street, carrying the clumsy shoe box under his arm.

Spring had softened the air with wild buttercups, and the sensuous fragrance of sprouting grass dimmed even the stables and stovepipes of town. Springtime stirred the calm-

WRANGLER

by LLOYD KEVIN

est man to restlessness—and Mart Wolford was far from calm. With only two seasoned cowpunchers left on his Highwoods ranch and three newly hired green hands to snarl up their best preparations for spring round-up, he had no time for store dawdling.

Reluctantly Mart passed up the hot water and bay rum luxury of the barber shop, in spite of the two weeks' matted growth of dark whiskers that clouded his reflection in the window. He stayed in town only long enough for a few words with an old friend in the barred back room of the express office before he swung the sorrel up onto the rutted trail for home.

The late spring thaw and heavy rains had made the trail a quagmire. Twice Mart left the deep ruts and struck out across prairie and rolling hill to make better time—only to bog down in the saturated sod of some low swale. The second time the sorrel threw a shoe, and Mart was afoot, leading his limping mount along fresh green slopes heady with the scent of yellowbells and dotted with buttercups and lavender shooting-stars. By dark he found a tarpaper-covered shack and a two-bit rancher he had once known, a place to sleep and to leave the lame sorrel. But there were no spare horses.

So it was that daybreak found Mart Wolford plodding alone through muck and mire in his tight new boots to catch the northbound stage, the mud-spattered shoe box still under his arm.

The northbound stage—the run to Fort Benton, Mart mused. It was the one stage ride he had gone to all pains to avoid. The thought put a wry twist to his wide mouth and darkened his blue eyes. There would be a strongbox aboard that stage that made for mighty poor company.

And there would be a shotgun guard. Mart glanced down at his briar-snagged wool pants and mackinaw coat. In this spattered outfit he looked as rough as outlaw Jingo Parker himself the day he held up the Beaverhead stage singlehanded. There was a good chance that the guard would show him the muzzle end of the shotgun and the driver would whip up his team at the sight of him.

Mart's thickening beard, always darker than his brown hair, was already beginning to curl and mat, and it broadened his long face, making him appear heavier. With his eyes hid under the drooping brim of his work hat, he could pass for any range drifter.

A smile twitched at Mart's lips as he slogged along the trail. He had not ridden the stage line for many months. Crews were always changing, restless drivers always moving on. There was a possibility that nobody on the stage would recognize him.

It would take a sharp eye to peg this drifter as Mart Wolford, son of the late Martin Wolford, and present owner of the Circle W cattle outfit on the slopes of the Highwoods. But recognized or not, Mart took satisfaction in the weight of the heavy Colt sagging in the holster at his hip.

GAUNT-SHOULDERED Buff Britt sat high atop the swaying stagecoach with the lines wrapped around his twisted, knobby fingers. His pale eyes narrowed in his whiskered face at sight of the lone figure in the road far ahead. The weight of the sixgun was plain in the cowman's bowlegged stride. Buff Britt spat over the wheel and felt the nerves tighten along his bony, arthritic frame.

This trip, especially, he wanted no gun trouble. This was his first and last trip over the Fort Benton trail. And yet he had been cursed with the responsibility for a strongbox that fairly screamed its value. And inside the coach, along with four assorted male passengers, rode as pretty a girl as had ever come out of an Eastern city. Wealth and a woman—a sure-fire formula for trouble.

This was an old driver's last run, an old man's last useful chore. Just as Buff Britt had, not so many years back, led his last posse as sheriff and jailed his last troublesome drunk as a town marshal, now he had come to the last time he would ever crowd a stage and four horses along any set of wheel ruts.

But that was a man's own busines, as much his own secret as the knowledge that the rusty gun in his holster was no more help to him than a heavy ornament. Admit-

ting the truth, even to himself, brought its dark pain—but old fingers too stiffened with rheumatism to grip a set of reins had long since lost their sure touch on a trigger. Britt squinted around at the uneven clumps of black whiskers sprouting from the man's sallow, spotty cheeks and mouthed a silent curse.

Back in his sheriff days, Buff Britt had once fired Tige Hule off a deputy's job. And twice later he had run the man out of Western cowtowns. There was no honesty in the man; he fouled the very air he breathed. And yet through some devious plan Tige Hule had climbed aboard the coach at Billings as a last-minute shotgun guard. Britt choked on the acid in his mouth and spat over the near wheel. This was a sorry trip from the start.

Buff Britt yanked his black hatbrim low over his eyes and studied the figure in the road ahead. Habit born of years as a lawman helped him to catalog the man. And memory fitted the pieces together. In spite of the battered garb, that had to be young Mart Wolford of the Circle W.

Old Martin Wolford had sided Britt on many a wild manhunt in bygone days. Even at a distance there were some of old Martin's gestures showing up in the younger man.

But why would young Mart be way off out here on the stage road, afoot in a pair of cheap store boots that plainly galled his feet when he had a dozen good horses in his corral and handmade boots aplenty in that big log ranch house of his on the slopes of the Highwoods?

Buff tried to shrug away the tension that gripped him. It was a sure sign he was getting old, he told himself, letting commonplace things upset him. But the fact remained—the only danger on this trip, the only reason for a shotgun guard, was that cursed strongbox—and the parcel inside that padlocked box was addressed to young Mart Wolford.

TIGE HULE slouched on the high seat of the stage, the loaded shotgun resting between his bony knees with the muzzle tilting skyward. Absently, automatically, he reached into his coat pocket for a piece of rock candy and placed it between his brown stumps of teeth. Sugar gave a lean man energy to think. And lanky Tige Hule had a heavy chore of thinking to do.

That foot-sore drifter plodding in the road up ahead—there was something about that lone figure that stirred a man's danger sense.

Hule gripped the shotgun a shade tighter between his knees. Reason told him that it could not be young Mart Wolford. But reason failed to control the pounding blood in his temples and the shortness of breath.

For well over two long years Tige Hule had been watching for Mart Wolford, seeing his tall, lean-muscled shape in every stranger's silhouette, sensing his piercing eyes in every dark cloud and dust-devil of the prairie—waiting for the sickening moment when young Mart would learn that he, one-time Deputy Sheriff Tige Hule, had fired the bullet that crippled old Martin Wolford and took him eventually to his death.

Some day, Hule felt sure, he would have to kill young Mart as well. But he would name the place—and the odds.

With the passing months, the ghost in Tige Hule's mind had somewhat dimmed. The apparition of a vengeful Mart Wolford had almost faded—until this hasty plan to rob the Fort Benton stage. And Mart Wolford's name was on the parcel in the strongbox.

Hule drew a rough hand across his eyes and squinted up the road. Cloud-shadow had moved over the man on foot and blotted the details of his features. Dark clouds were massing in the north and west, warning of an approaching storm.

Tige Hule reached for another chunk of rock candy, forgetting the piece he already worried between his aching teeth. This was no time to get the shakes, he cautioned himself. It was no time to be seeing Mart Wolford in every passing shadow. They had too much at stake, he and Jingo Parker and Perry Sillby.

A storm was brewing in the west. There would be a real gully-washer of a rain by

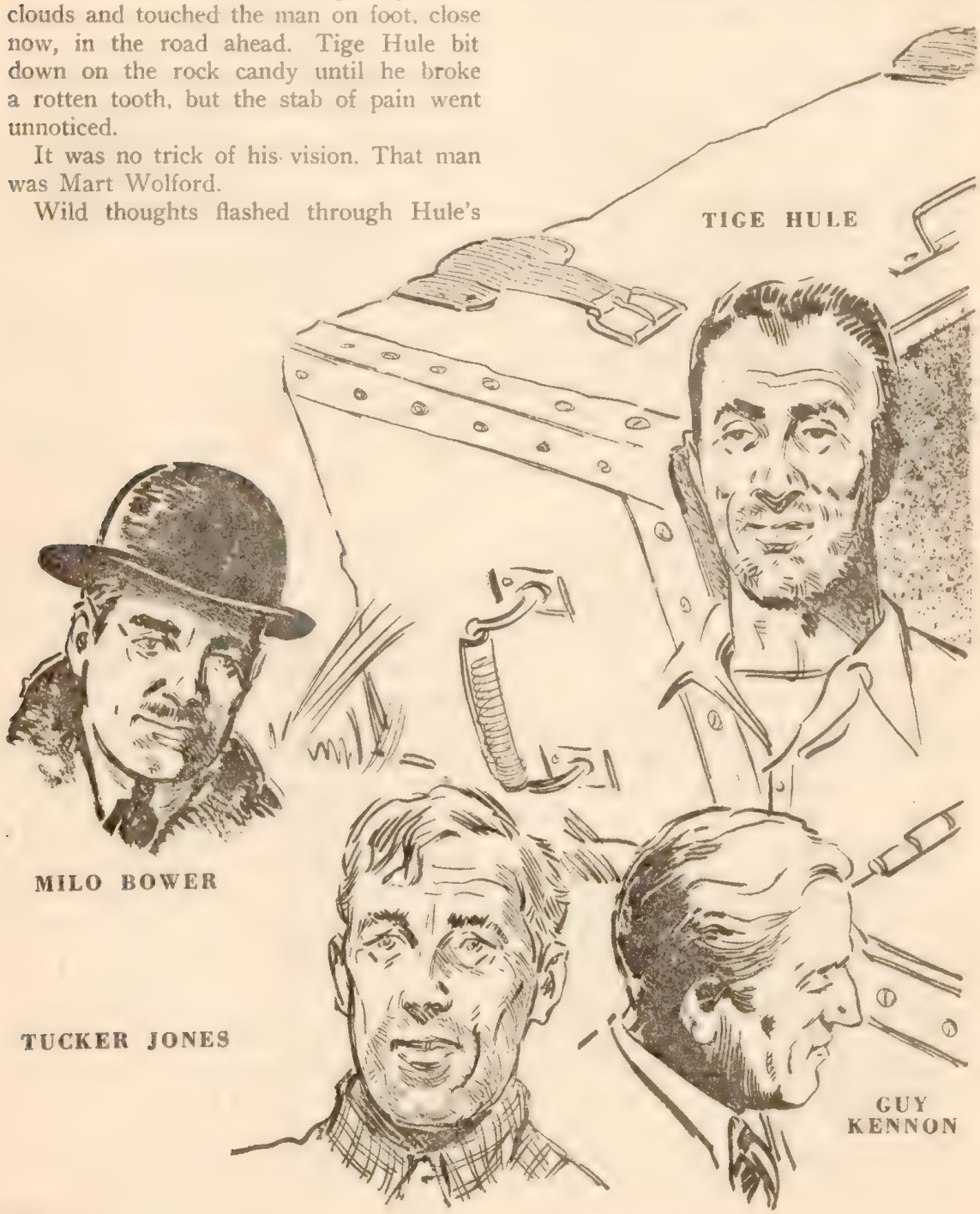
the time they reached Big Spring Creek. But Jingo Parker would get through with the horses. They could depend on Jingo to be there. And Perry Sillby, as weak-livered as he was, could still draw the fangs of any would-be hero inside the coach.

A dazzling shaft of sunlight split the clouds and touched the man on foot, close now, in the road ahead. Tige Hule bit down on the rock candy until he broke a rotten tooth, but the stab of pain went unnoticed.

It was no trick of his vision. That man was Mart Wolford.

Wild thoughts flashed through Hule's brain like sparks of heat lightning. Had he alone recognized Wolford? He shot a sidelong look at Buff Britt's weathered face. It was as impassive as if carved from clay.

"Stranger ahead," Hule announced hoarsely. "We got no room for him here—we ain't stopping to pick him up!"



ALDA McCLAIN
MART WOLFORD
PERRY SILBY
BUFF BRITT

Britt made no comment, no sign he had heard.

"Damn!" Hule muttered under his breath, and he gripped the shotgun in both hands. Let the old goat play dumb and stubborn—everybody knew he was helpless as an old woman with those crippled hands of his!

"Looks like a road agent," Hule observed, his words hissing through his stumps of teeth. "Maybe Jingo Parker—"

"Just you be careful," Britt warned, an edge to his voice, "where you point that scatter gun!"

MILO BOWER, the little, round-faced drummer from Chicago, sat in the corner of the seat, facing back toward the long stretch of muddy road they had just covered.

Sitting in the corner, he could brace himself against the jolt and sway of the coach. And he could watch the other four passengers.

Learning names of traveling companions became a convenient habit for a traveling man, and remembering was a necessity. The watery-eyed town bum sharing the other corner of the same seat was Perry Sillby. Milo Bower had seen his weak face in a dozen saloons on his travels. Sillby wore the familiar threadbare clothes, but the big gun in the awkward-looking holster at his side was strange. It appeared out of place on a man who was down to doing any odd chore for a dollar.

Directly across from Bower, in the seat facing front, sat a sparse-whiskered drifter called Tucker Jones. He, too, appeared to have seen better days. The clothes covering his lean frame were quilted with patches. His wheedling voice held an odd English accent—Australian, Bower guessed.

Guy Kennon sat next to the Australian, in the middle of the seat and stiff as a cottonwood post. His faded eyes stared out of a face as lean and set as dry rawhide, under a thatch of white hair. Even the jolt of the coach failed to move him. An old cattleman, Bower pegged him, and as stubborn as they come.

In the corner beside Kennon sat the girl. She was slim and supple and quite tall for a girl. Alda McClain was her name, Bower had learned, and she came from some town far back east. Her hair was blonde and silken under her hat and she had quick green eyes.

The crinkles around Milo Bower's eyes deepened as he watched the girl's face. She was far better than any scenery outside the coach. But her green eyes were on his, pin-sharp, and he looked away, his color rising.

"I hear we're hauling treasure," he remarked, to make conversation. "A big chest of raw opal direct from the Australian opal fields."

The man in the patches brightened and his shifty eyes flickered across Bower's face. He opened his mouth to speak, then caught the cold indifference of the others and changed his mind.

"Some lucky cowpoke," Bower continued, "had a rich uncle in Australia who died and left him a fortune in opals. I only hope we don't get held up while we're hauling it to him!"

Perry Sillby, in the other corner of the seat, made a furtive, nervous movement. He took both hands to twist his clumsy holster to a better angle.

The drifter fumbled at his patched knee with bony fingers. The girl gazed out over the flower-dotted slopes. The white-haired cattle rancher stared straight ahead.

"Blamed communicative outfit!" Bower remarked. He shrugged his shoulders. "I wonder what you'd do if we really had a holdup."

WOLFORD came to a three-foot cutbank alongside the road and climbed up out of the way as the horses, shying and snorting, jangled past him. This was the moment. So far, neither driver nor guard appeared to recognize him. Now, if he could get aboard . . .

Buff Britt hauled in on the reins.

"Whip 'em up—damn it! Tige Hule exploded, throwing an ugly look at Britt. He jerked his yellow eyes back to Mart, keeping the shotgun steady. The black muzzle was almost in Mart's face. "Hit the trail, mister!" Hule growled, sighting along the

gunbarrel. "Make some far-apart tracks!"

The stage slowed, and the high cutbank brought Mart even with driver and guard, almost on the same level. Britt had his foot on the brake lever. He slammed it home, and the wheels locked. The sudden lurch of the stage threw Tige Hule off balance and the gunbarrel wavered.

Mart caught the bare steel in both hands and jerked it away. The heavy concussion fairly lifted him from the ground. It shook Tige Hule loose from his hold on the gun, but the guard was already coming over the wheel.

Mart let go the barrel that was suddenly hot in his hands. The jar against his eardrums left him dizzy. Burning wool from the blast across his coat collar added its stench to the powdersmoke. His eyes blurred from the flash, so it was little more than instinct that made him stiffen out his right arm—and Hule slammed squarely into it.

For just an instant the guard was stopped, and Mart shook his head to clear his senses. Then Hule was on him like a desperate animal fighting for life.

Mart gave ground, surprised and stunned. He had tangled in fights before with hard characters, both drunk and sober. But this was no ordinary fight. This man seemed insane with the lust to maim and kill, and seemed insensible to pain. There was no reason in him.

Mart could only back away, trying to get the measure of the man, trying for an opening. He took a wicked right across the eye that laid his brow open and nearly took his left eye with it. Another blow split his upper lip, and it swelled instantly. And yet his own punches took no effect.

He circled, still giving ground. Abruptly, the edge of the cut-bank gave way beneath his feet and he went down under the wheels of the stage. Hule, always crowding him, went off balance with him, and they rolled together in the mud. They fought and gouged and twisted and strained, blinded in the mud, while skittish horses dragged the locked wheels inches past their bare heads.

Then Mart was out on the other side and up, sweating in every pore and cursing the mackinaw he wore. Hule's distorted face swam before him and he landed his first solid blow. The gun-guard sprawled full length.

"You begged for it—" Mart rasped. And he was surprised at the growing heat of his own anger. Why had this wild-eyed guard marked him for slaughter? He hardly knew the man, had only seen him around town a few times, could not even remember his name. Why had the man turned a shotgun on him in the first place?

Hule staggered up and Mart struck him again, laid him flat.

Then he saw the sixgun in the mud. Hule was reaching for it, had it almost in his grasp.

"Pick it up!" Mart growled, "and I'll blow you in two!"

Hule gripped the gun, lifted it. Mart started the quick reach for his own weapon. This was the finish. It would close the deal once and for all—a sure end to a crazy, senseless fight.

But Buff Britt's knife-edged voice froze both men. They raised their eyes to see the sixgun steady in Britt's right hand. Hule hesitated. There was nothing old-womanish about the look of that weapon. Slowly he let go the muddy gun.

Mart cursed the meddling driver under his breath. Another second and it would have been over. Only a quick bullet would cure a mad-dog. Now nothing was settled.

BLOOD still pounding crazily in his head, Mart yanked off his mackinaw and beat the mud from it. He walked around the stage and climbed the cutbank to retrieve the shoe box he had dropped when the grabbed the shotgun barrel. Not until he had reached under a rear wheel to pick up his hat did he see the other gun lying in the wheel rut, the heavy Colt that he had thought was in his holster.

For an instant his senses swam, and he leaned against a muddy wheel for support. Vaguely he heard Britt's voice.

"Pick up your scattergun," the driver was ordering Hule, "and the rest of your hardware and get back up here. And you,

mister—" he called down to Mart—"you better crawl inside and catch your breath!"

Mart wiped the mud from the Colt and slid it back into the holster from where it had fallen when the cutbank caved under him. Groggily, he climbed into the coach. He tossed the shoe box, its brown wrapping torn and muddy now but still intact, under his feet and slumped into the seat between the little derbied drummer and the saloon hanger-on, Perry Sillby.

The stage lurched ahead. For a time Mart could feel all eyes upon him, searching every detail of his appearance. But when he looked up to meet them, one by one they drew away. He was a stranger, a threat of violence.

Little wonder, Mart thought, feeling his puffed upper lip. He had looked rough enough before he met the stage, and the shotgun guard's knuckles and a tumble in the mud had not improved his appearance. His left eye was swollen nearly shut.

Carefully, he settled back and studied his fellow passengers with his good right eye. Perry Sillby he had seen before, but the little drummer and the skinny man with the patched knees were strangers. Guy Kennon, he recognized—a lone-wolf rancher from the Skonkin. But Guy would never know him.

Another brilliant shaft of sunlight broke through the thickening rain clouds and flooded the coach. For the first time Mart could get a good view of the girl in the corner. He caught his breath and strained to see with both eyes. There could be no mistake. It was Alda McClain!

Mart stiffened against the cracked leather of the seat. He held his breath in an effort to silence his wildly pounding heartbeats for fear the violent drumming would reach the girl's ears. Alda McClain! And right here in his inside pocket he still carried the last letter from her saying that she would not arrive in Montana Territory for another month!

Something had gone wrong. Some message must have failed to reach him. Now here was Alda on her way to the ranch in the Highwoods—and no plans for the wedding. The new wallpaper was not even up.

Mart shrunk into his coat collar. It was impossible that she should not recognize him. But her quick green eyes only lightly brushed his face and moved on. Then he remembered his appearance—a far cry from the clean-shaven dandy who had held her in his arms on that last night before he left school. He felt his bruised and whiskered face and breathed easier.

IT HAD BEEN two years ago on the night he had received word of his father's death. Old Martin Wolford had been crippled by a wild bullet and ailing for some time, Mart learned later. But the old man had kept it to himself so that Mart could get a little more education in a good Eastern school.

They had made their hasty plans the next morning, Mart and Alda, all mixed up with packing and train tickets and a cold-eyed maiden aunt who would not let Alda out of her sight for a minute. The goodbyes had been stiff and formal—but the letters that followed had made up in warmth.

Now Alda was here on this creaking stagecoach. Mart studied her from his squinted right eye and all the old rush of emotion came flooding back and his blood hammered in his veins. And again came the feeling of unreality that he could claim such a delicate parcel of beauty and charm and loving womanhood.

But what a time for Alda to come West! And on this particular stagecoach—with a strongbox up in the boot tempting holdups and gun violence, and a crazy shotgun guard itching to blow a stranger's head off. If only he could have met her in Billings . . .

Then Mart remembered again his stand with an empty holster and a numb weakness took him in the knees. He would have to play it a lot sharper than that if he meant to protect Alda on this trip. . . .

Milo Bower was wedged in between the window and Mart Wolford's muddy mackinaw. With his derby crowded tight on his round head, the wild jolting of the stage could not dislodge him.

He had just witnessed the most savage fight he had ever seen and it left him shak-

en. He could not erase the picture from his mind. The odd part, he recalled, looking back, was that not one of the passengers moved during the whole ruckus. Nobody left the coach or tried to interfere. They must have been as stunned as he was, he figured—or maybe scared.

Now a tension was building up in him, the need to talk. But with the battling stranger beside him, he could not discuss the fight.

"The way the clouds are piling up," he remarked, choosing a neutral subject, "looks like we'll have a regular goose-drownder of a rain!"

Faces brightened. Guy Kennon nodded, and the patched drifter responded with a quick, "Right!"

What a difference, Bower observed, from the frozen silence of a while ago. Witnessing the fight together had linked five former strangers in a common bond. And now the newcomer in their midst had strengthened that bond. Men who had glared at each other with quick suspicion were now ready to join forces against an outsider.

Bower grinned. "We may have to swim to Fort Benton."

Perry Sillby cleared his throat and peered out past the curtain on his side. "Looks bad," he agreed weakly.

The girl's eyes met Bower's. "Do you think," she asked, "that we'll really have trouble getting through?" Her soft voice brought all eyes around.

Bower shrugged. "Hard to tell."

Guy Kennon rubbed his chin. "If Big Spring Crick isn't over the banks, I reckon we can make it. But I've seen that stream when it looked like Old Muddy itself!"

"Couldn't be no worse than the Bulloo Floodwater outa Queensland," Tucker Jones ventured, tracing the plaid lines in a knee patch with his forefinger. "Many a time I had to wade to Gibber Station—"

YOU FROM down Australia way?" Bower interrupted.

Jones nodded. "I was a drover in the backblocks—"

"No wonder you lit up like a brakeman's lantern when I mentioned Australian opals a while ago. You ought to know all about the stuff in the strongbox we're carrying up above."

A crafty look came into the drifter's eyes. "I saw a big light opal out of Queensland—brought five thousand pound sterling in London, I hear."

"How much is that worth in money?" Perry Sillby asked quickly, leaning past Mart.

"About fifteen thousand," Bower supplied.

Sillby sucked in his breath in an audible hiss.

"Where you pick up them things?" Guy Kennon demanded, twisting for a better look at Jones. "Did you find any when you was there?"

"Hell, no!" The drifter's voice took on a complaining whine.

Sillby leaned far past Mart and lowered his voice. "If a gent was to have a handful of them opals—where would he turn 'em to cash? Big money, I mean?"

Tucker Jones shifted his narrowed eyes to Sillby's face. "You got some opal?"

"I ain't saying. But if I was to have?"

"Man—you've got to know values. There's some that can't tell snide from precious. I see a tributer from Cunnamulla get fleeced outa five hundred pounds on a stone no bigger than a—" The drifter's eyes went crafty again. "Now if you was to take me in on a deal—"

The stage lurched into a deep hole and out again. Milo Bower eased his derby off his brow. "The way I figure," he remarked, "that strongbox up there could hold a hundred thousand dollars' worth of precious stone—"

"Or twice that," Tucker Jones put in. "If it's Queensland opal."

Guy Kennon snorted. "You talk big—but any opals I ever seen was little blue jiggers you could buy for two bucks. And they come from Hungary."

"That stuff!" Jones curled his lip, exposing narrow front teeth. "You ain't seen opal till you watch the roll of colors from a Queensland seam. Like a rainbow pressed down to handlin' size! And it's a funny

thing that no matter how the seam buckles, the colors always run flat, like oil—"

Sillby's weak chin was trembling, his watery eyes aglitter. "If I can get hold of some opal—"

Tucker Jones nodded. "Cut me in!" He licked his thin lips. "What I wouldn't give to stick a hand into that strongbox we're carrying!"

"Mister," Milo Bower agreed heartily, "you're speakin' for all of us!"

With a rattle of iron on granite, the stage topped a ridge and started downgrade to Cottonwood Junction.

ALDA McCLAIN had left Philadelphia full of bright courage, in spite of her aunt's chilling remarks about young ladies who went out to the wild and woolly West to seek a husband.

After all, she had known Mart Wolford for nearly three whole months before his father died and he was called back to Montana Territory. It was true that they had not been really well acquainted until the last day or two of his stay—but they had made up for the loss with scores of letters since. The Wolford Ranch in the Highwoods, she felt sure, would seem as much like home as Philadelphia.

The trip had started off like a dream, with the smooth train chuffing through Pennsylvania woods and fields, cows in green meadows, sunshine, and woodchucks whistling. Then came Ohio and Indiana, with flat ground and open sky. It was a girl's dream of high adventure come true.

But west of the Mississippi, trouble started. The train was derailed in a sea of ice and mud, and passengers had to wade out, only to climb aboard rickety coaches that rattled over a new railbed as though ready to fall apart on every curve. Rain leaked in, and the ride became a nightmare of cold and soot and cinders.

And the new land spread out in endless miles. When the rain quit, the wind out of an empty, pale sky brought loneliness that froze the fondest hopes. Only a fighting stubbornness inherited from her Irish father kept Alda moving west.

At last she was in Montana Territory, and her heart beat faster. This would be her home. But there were so many, many miles of it, and days of travel. And she was the only woman. Men stared openly or leered from corners. Bolder, self-confident dandies tried direct approach, but her green eyes could blaze cold fire. Her eyes did not reveal, she hoped, how really scared she was.

In Billings, Alda waited three whole days for Mart to come for her as she had asked him in her last-minute letter. She never left the hotel for fear she might miss him. Finally, in desperation, she paid her fare on the coach. In Fort Benton they could direct her to the Wolford Ranch. Or maybe sooner—Mart had said that the stage road ran close by his land. She had to find him.

But the stage was worst of all—a round-faced drummer in a derby hat stumbling over his own feet to watch her ankles as she climbed aboard, and now sitting there in the corner leering at her. And that weak-faced creature directly across from her with the big gun and holster—he was more repulsive than the skinny, weasel-eyed man with the patches.

Now she wished she had taken the .32 revolver her aunt had offered. It had seemed foolish at the time, but how comforting if she had been able to grip it in her handbag now—especially if that shotgun guard ever decided to ride inside the coach.

The very thought of the fight she had witnessed brought an involuntary shudder. It had been brutal, beastly, insane. Even if the man with the shotgun and the thin dark hair and yellow eyes *had* been hired to protect the stage from holdups and threatening strangers, as somebody explained, it was plain to see he was far more dangerous than the stranger he had tried to drive off.

Alda studied the bruised and battered face of the man in the middle of the opposite seat. There was something about him, something about his eyes—his one good eye—that reminded her of somebody she knew. He was unshaven and his clothes were rough and muddy and torn, but the way he held his head, the set of his shoul-

ders, marked him as being different from the rest.

WATCHING him, Alda felt her breath coming a little faster, her pulse quickening, and she clenched her fingers, angry at herself. What had this raw land done to her that she could let her emotions run wild over a reckless, fighting stranger? She deliberately looked away, out the window at the muddy slopes.

Off against the hills the rain was falling again, pale blue curtains of it across a bank of black clouds. But the stage was slowing. A corral fence came into view, and rough buildings. Smoke billowed from a stove pipe. They were stopping.

"Cottonwood Junction," the drummer announced. "We can light down and stretch a bit, and maybe quench our thirst."

Alda straightened her hat and tugged at the pleats in her full skirt. With a despairing sigh, she gave up. Another few miles in this terrible conveyance and her best traveling outfit would be fit for nothing more than the charity box.

Mart Wolford followed the drummer out of the coach, and Tucker Jones jumped down close behind them. Mart turned to give Alda McClain a hand down, but old Guy Kennon was there before him.

Much better, Mart thought quickly. Sooner or later he would have to let Alda know who he was, but just how to go about it was still a question. Looking as disreputable as he did now, he would probably scare her back to Philadelphia!

Mart stayed by the coach while the rest went on into the building. He leaned on a wheel and watched the stable hands unhitch the teams and bring fresh horses. The outfit was ready to roll when Buff Britt came out of a side door wiping his mouth with the back of his twisted hand.

"Thanks for dealing in on that ruckus a while back," Mart said quietly. "I was crowding my luck."

One of Britt's bushy eyebrows arched up over a pale eye and he grinned. "I figured you'd overplayed your hand, Mart."

Mart jumped at the sound of his name. "Then you know me?"

"Sure I do. Your daddy and me spent a lot of good days together."

Mart studied the older man a brief moment. "Then you must be Buffalo Britt. I was away back East a lot—"

"Just call me Buff, Mart."

"But if you knew me, howcome—"

Britt chuckled. "You didn't introduce yourself, so why should I call you?" He lowered his voice. "Besides, I thought maybe you already knew about that strongbox we carry with a load addressed to you."

"I did." Mart glanced toward the door. "Do you think that gun-guard recognized me too?"

Britt shook his head in caution. "I think he did, just on a hunch. But why he jumped you—that'll take some finding out. His name is Tige Hule. Does it mean anything to you?"

"Not at the moment. I'll study on it."

Britt nodded. "If you need help—I'm not too handy with a gun any more, but I'll side you all the way!"

"Thanks, Buff!" There was a movement at the door, somebody about to come out. "Don't let 'em gun you for that strongbox," Mart warned quickly. "It's not worth it. Only a few trinkets; maybe some opal my mother's older brother picked up in Australia. Nothing worth a life. But if those rannies down in the coach keep talking, they'll have it blown up to a million!"

Britt grinned. "It's always the same. You could stuff a sack with greenbacks and print the value on the outside in foothigh letters and rumor would still multiply it by ten!"

"Whatever happens, Buff," Mart put in quickly, "look after Alda—look after the girl!"

Alda came up to the coach with Guy Kennon. Tucker Jones and the drummer were close behind.

"I'm surprised that Hule would leave the stage so long," Mart remarked to Buff as Kennon helped the girl in. "See'n as he's so set on guarding it!"

Britt nodded toward the corner of the building. "Don't let that sneakin' jasper fool you. He's never been out of sight of this rig. He just had to quench his thirst

and pass a few words with that bar-bum you're riding with inside."

THE PASSENGERS were all in the coach and Britt waited with the lines wrapped around his knobby fingers before Tige Hule came out to take his place. Hule moved stiffly, handing up the shotgun and slowly climbing up over the wheel. The truth was bitter to admit, even to himself, but he had taken the severest beating of his life. In spite of every trick he knew, Mart Wolford's fists had jarred him.

He choked back a groan as the stage lumbered into motion behind the fresh horses. Every inch of his body protested. He reached to his pocket for a piece of rock candy, but gave up the idea. His swollen jaws would not stand the strain.

The rain that had been hanging like a silken screen against the hills moved down,

and spring lightning winked and twinkled in the forest of black clouds that shut out the fading light. Tige Hule twisted into a slicker and hunched against the storm, his thoughts as black as the thunderheads above.

He would kill Mart Wolford tonight. The time had come. And he would kill him slow; there were a dozen ways. Hule forgot the torture to his own body on the lurching stage in his sadistic planning for revenge.

And he would club down old Buff Britt at the same time. The old goat had lived too long the minute he took a hand in the fight. Had Britt really been a threat, Hule wondered, thinking back, with his rusty sixgun in his twisted hand? The odds had been too great to find out, and Tige Hule was never one to buck the odds.

Tonight the odds would be all in his favor. He would be rid of Wolford and Britt and make it pay. Perry Sillby's excited jabbering back at the junction raised even higher hopes for a big haul from the strongbox. Up to then he had only the declared valuation at the express office to count on —and that had been big enough. But if Sillby had been even half right, they would be crazy-rich. Jingo Parker could stall no longer on a full partnership—he would be glad to take Tige Hule in on the next big deal, after a haul like tonight's.

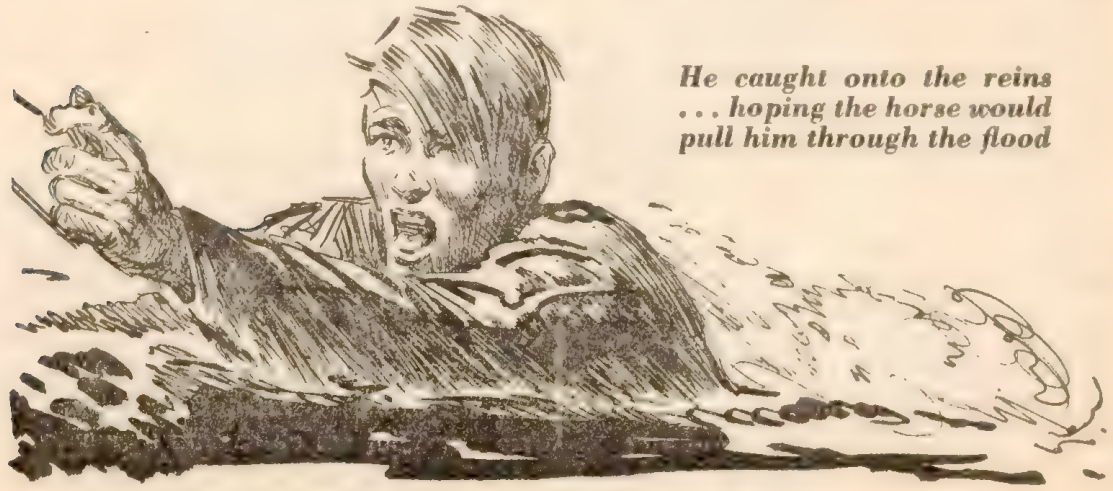
The rain came down in solid sheets and jarred against Hule's slicker, and the cold bit in, but it went unnoticed. Tige Hule had his yellow eyes on the darkening road ahead. Night would come early under the storm—and every minute brought them closer to Big Spring Creek and the meeting with Jingo Parker.

Opals! The strongbox was riding right with him, almost in hand's reach. Rainbow gems of living fire! They stirred a fever in a man's brain that mere money could never match. There was something about jewels, since the dawn of time, that drove men to madness—but it was a satisfying madness, like the cowboy's big drunk on a Saturday night.

It filled a hungry hollow in a man's empty, barren life.

Opals! Maybe, Hule thought suddenly, he could keep his share. He would sell only enough to grubstake himself until the next deal and keep the rest—keep the prettiest stones. He could picture himself in some snug shack on a cold winter night, with the storm howling outside, sitting by the fire and watching the play of lights in a thousand-dollar piece of glittering stone. They were like pressed rainbows, Perry Sillby had ranted. Sillby would want his share, too. Abruptly the face of the saloon bum clouded Hule's picture of self-satisfaction.

Maybe he could buy Sillby off, Hule figured—or better still, the worthless barfly might step in front of a stray bullet. Hule's lips twisted in a sardonic grin, and he fumbled under his slicker for a piece of rock candy. As he chewed, his grin widened.



He caught onto the reins . . . hoping the horse would pull him through the flood

BUFF BRITT hunched against the storm and let the horses pick their own ruts in the dark road. The last daylight had faded, and with it went the last of Britt's confidence.

He was an old man and the cold got through to him and numbed his every fiber. The wet chill turned his hands to missshapen, leaden weights, hardly alive except for the constant throbbing ache in every swollen joint.

He had been crazy to take this run, he told himself. He should have quit while he was ahead. There had been that dream of bumming his way south, maybe to California to join the old prospector he had wintered with six or eight years ago in Fort Benton. Old Joe was doing well down there, he had heard. But then, Joe had not answered Britt's last letter.

There was that job in Vormeier's Saloon in Butte waiting for him as long as he could hold a broom. But what would a crippled old man do all his days in a saloon among a bunch of hardrock copper miners?

No, summing it all up, Britt decided, there was no better place for him than right here in the box on a lurching stage. He would live for tonight and try not to think of tomorrow. Luckily, there could not be too many tomorrows. And the picture of the old bull buffalo crossed his mind, the horned-out leader shuffling his solitary way to death, while the hungry wolves waited in an ever-closing circle.

He shook the sodden lines against the wet backs of the horses and hunched lower under the beat of the rain. Tonight Buff Britt had a job and he would see it through. Come hell or high water, he would stick to the finish—and they had a good chance of running into both before the night was over.

There was only one wish, one vow, Buff Britt made to himself—if ever again he had Tige Hule lined in his sights, he would call on his last precious ounce of strength to pull that trigger!

Inside the dark coach a cold and silent group huddled in the hard seats while wind whipped the curtains and rain beat in. Several times during the dark, dragging hours Milo Bower or Tucker Jones tried to start a conversation, remarking about the force of the wind, the jolting rocks in the road, or guessing the depth of muddy water in the gullies they splashed through. But after a few short answers, silence took over again.

After a time the storm abated and a sickly moon poked through the clouds, and there was only the wind and the clop and splash of hoofs and the grind of iron tires.

Tucker Jones pulled aside a curtain and peered out into the weak and shadowy moonlight. He remarked, "it's still a ruddy old night for a holdup!"

Perry Sillby started up as though from half-sleep and made a blubbery, choking sound.

Bower chuckled. "When I get to thinking about them opals—makes me almost wish for a gun and a horse!"

"Blithering odd place to be sendin' stones," the drifter remarked; "out here to some lonesome cowdrover in the hills."

"Rainbow stones," Bower mused. "Instead of wrangling broncs, the lucky jasper will be wrangling rainbows!"

"Some look more like soap-bubbles, all colored like you see when you splash a drop of oil in a pannikin of water. And once I saw a fish, long as your arm, all turned to solid opal. Looked like some kind of a shark—"

"That's the best fish story I've heard yet!" the drummer cut in. And he laughed loudly at his own joke.

Guy Kennon cleared his throat. "Who's the cowpoke that's gettin' all this fancy jewelry? Anybody heard?"

A MOMENT of dark silence held the group. Then Milo Bower's voice came from the corner. "Fellow named Wolford, I believe. Mart Wolford."

Mart stiffened in sudden tension, and his eyes went to Alda McClain in the shadows of the opposite seat. Even from the darkness he could feel her searching green eyes on his face, and color rose hotly in his cheeks.

"Why, he's the man that I came West

to. He's the rancher I'm supposed to meet!" Alda said quickly.

Bower laughed. "All you got to do is follow the strongbox we're carrying and it'll take you right to him."

"What a stroke for the drover," came Jones's high, wheedling voice. "He gets the opals and the lady at the same time."

"Maybe they're a wedding present," Bower suggested. "Didn't you say, miss, that you was comin' West to get married?"

"I did not!" Alda retorted sharply.

Mart crowded forward. This had gone far enough. It was time for him to declare himself, no matter what the consequences. It was a far cry from the way he had wanted it. He had planned to polish the red-wheeled buggy—the roads would be drier in a month—and hitch up the best buggy team, and wear his new tailor-made suit in to Billings to meet Alda.

They would have been married by Reverend Samuelson and he could have brought her home to the clean freshly-papered ranch house. But all that was a pipe-dream now. She would have to see him at his rugged worst. He could only hope she would understand.

He leaned forward to speak directly to Alda—but a sudden locking of the brakes slammed him back in the seat.

Buff Britt's hoarse voice floated down. "Washout ahead! We're stopped!"

Perry Sillby jumped and frantically clawed out his clumsy big gun. He poked his nose past the curtain. "Why, we're two or three miles from Big Springs Creek yet—" Surprise and something close to relief colored his voice. He looked at the faces around him and his chin quivered.

"What you aiming to do?" Guy Kennon asked sourly. "Dry up the flood with your six-shooter?" He reached over and tripped the latch on the door. "Let's have a look outside."

Mart followed the rancher, stepping down into the rain-washed gumbo of the road. A glance at the surrounding hills told him that they were indeed two or three miles from Big Spring Creek. And directly ahead of them a fresh, dark gully crossed the road, six to eight feet deep.

"We'll find the shortest way around it," Mart suggested, starting to the left of the road.

"Yeah," Guy Kennon agreed. "I'll take the other side."

Scrub Willows and wild rose bushes dotted the rough ground, deep patches of shadow that deceived the eye and tricked the feet into bog holes. Mart explored a hundred yards only to find the wash deeper than at the road. He was halfway back to the stage, picking his way through a ditch of knee-high brush, when a heavy shot roared out. A second shot followed like an echo to the first, only from a lighter gun.

Mart sprinted for the road. The shot seemed to have come from beyond, out on the flat where Kennon had gone. Tige Hule was clambering down with his shotgun to investigate. Bower and Jones tumbled from the stage. Mart passed them, and he and Hule arrived at the spot at the same time.

THEY FOUND Guy Kennon bending over a dark form in the shadows, a pocket-sized .38 in his hand. A little way beyond, two horses snorted and nickered, one dragging reins.

"Who was it?" Hule asked sharply. "Who was it?"

Guy straightened up. "I've got no idea—the jasper took a shot at me, so I handed one back."

"Looks like you got him for keeps," Mart said, feeling for a heartbeat. There was none, and Mart shook his head. Now they had a dead man on their hands—what a wonderful reception for Alda.

"That's good shooting," Milo Bower remarked, hurrying up to the scene. "Damn good shooting in the dark!"

"Let's just say I was lucky," Kennon replied.

Tige Hule rolled the body over into the moonlight. "It's Jingo Parker!" he yelled. "You shot Jingo Parker!"

"Then I'll say I was double-lucky!"

"You killed Jingo Parker," Hule repeated, unbelieving.

"Is that any crime?" Mart put in.

Hule winced, and for an instant his yel-

low eyes met Mart's look. Then he turned away, frowning, uncertain.

"We better catch the outlaw's saddle," Kennon suggested.

Mart went with the rancher to quiet the nervous animal. The second horse was tied on a lead rope, saddled and bridled, ready to ride. Kennon, through force of habit, examined the brands.

"Hey." he shouted. "This other bronc's mine. Lazy H Bar J. I sure don't know how Jingo Parker come to have him—but I'm taking him back here and now!"

He untied the rope and swung into the saddle. "This will beat walking from the stage road home. And it'll lighten your load. If anybody wants to ask me any questions about shooting the outlaw, I'll be at the ranch. The Lazy H Bar J—"

He prodded the horse into a gallop and reined off across the flat country toward the hills in the north.

Mart turned to find Buff Britt standing beside him. "Well, Buff," he said. "There goes one of your passengers."

Britt shook his head. "There's others I'd rather see go!" he said softly. He looked down at the body on the ground. "I reckon we'll have to load this thing aboard and take it on into Benton. So we didn't lighten our load a damn bit."

Mart helped to roll the body in canvas and heave it atop the stage. The outlaw's horse, a long-legged roan, still stood by, reins trailing.

"I'll ride ahead on the spare horse," Mart suggested, "and lead you around this washout. The ground looks good down there on the flat."

He leaned into the coach and retrieved his battered shoe box. Alda was watching him, and he hesitated, searching for words to comfort her, for some means to reassure her. But words eluded him—there was so much to say, so much to explain, and neither time nor place. And there sat Perry Sillby with the clumsy gun in his hand.

"Put that thing away," Mart ordered sharply, "before you hurt yourself!"

He turned and caught up the reins and led the roan aside. Tying the shoebox securely behind the saddle, he swung astride and led the way down across the flat through the tail of the wash.

"Whip 'em up along about here!" he called back to Britt. "Feels like quicksand!"

ONCE AGAIN Buff Britt was the veteran stage driver in action. His voice raised echoes from the rolling hills and his whip popped an inch from the leaders' flattened ears. Harness jangled, and the stage rocketed into the mud, hesitated, and then rolled, creaking and grinding, up out again and onto the solid road. Britt settled back wearily, flexing his stiffened fingers.

Mart waved and rode on ahead. He would be of more help scouting the trail than back with the coach, he decided. He could check on the road and warn Britt of any holes. He could keep the stage in sight—but he would stay out of range of Hule's shotgun.

There was something amiss with the shotgun guard, something that still failed to add up. The fight back on the trail had been no ordinary ruckus. Hule had used every killing trick in the book. But why?

Then there was the odd look Mart had surprised on the man's pasty features when he discovered the outlaw had been shot.

Jingo Parker had been leading an extra horse, all saddled and bridled and ready to ride. He must have been planning to meet somebody. Had that horse been meant for Tige Hule?

Mile Bower, the drummer in the derby hat, was not the type, but the drifter measured up to about the right level. It was a sure thing that Guy Kennon had made no rendezvous with the outlaw, or why the shooting? But bleary-eyed Perry Sillby wore a strange gun, and a weak man was hard to figure.

Parker could have been planning to meet some stranger, someone afoot, but it hardly seemed likely. The finger of suspicion kept coming back to Tige Hule and the snaky look in his yellow eyes. Mart glanced back at the stage and nudged the roan to a quicker pace. That shotgun could reach out a long way.

It was not surprising that they had met Jingo Parker on the road, Mart figured. Word travels fast when a valuable shipment is sent by stage, and the news that the shipment was precious gems would double the interest. The fact that such oddities as opals would be hard to turn into cash this side of Frisco seemed of little account to a highwayman.

He should have some reassurance, Mart realized, from the knowledge that Jingo Parker was now only a stiffening corpse bundled atop the stage. But there was little satisfaction in it as long as the other riddles went unanswered.

Tonight he had to lead the stage through, help old Buff Britt wheel on into Fort Benton. He would go on to the end of the run, he decided, rather than turn off at the Circle W in the Highwoods. He would go on to Fort Benton and see that Alda found a good room at the new Grand Union Hotel.

A new inspiration struck him—at Fort Benton he could slip away to the barber shop and get a shave and a bath and maybe pick up a new outfit of clothes at T. C. Power's. Then he could meet his bride-to-be as he had intended. What a lucky accident it was that put him on this particular stage. He had gone out of his way to avoid the stage, to leave the responsibility to the stage line to get the shipment through to Fort Benton. He had followed a hunch that some outlaw with more imagination than good horse sense would try to lift the strongbox.

A NEW MASS of clouds scudded out of the west and banked across the moon. No rain fell, but a moaning wind rattled the wild rose bushes and rippled the muddy water in the puddles. Mart reined up to let the stage come up into earshot. He could scarcely see the lead team in the murky cloud shadow that darkened the night.

The roan sidled into the wind, shying at a rose bush and pawing the mud in restlessness. Mart reined on down the trail, letting the horse run to work out the chill. At the rate they were moving, morning would find them still in the hills, and he was beginning to feel the cold himself, even through his mackinaw.

The roan trotted knee-deep in swirling water before Mart was aware of Big Spring Creek. And then he could recognize no landmarks in the darkness, only rippling, tumbling water. He pulled the horse to a walk and studied the expanse of flood.

Driftwood of all kinds writhed and rolled in the current. A large tree, uprooted and adrift, came downstream toward him, end for end as branches dragged the bottom. Suddenly it swung broadside, and jagged roots drove straight at the horse's hind legs.

Mart jumped the roan into the clear and prodded him on as branches swept by. The horse stumbled, caught his footing, and jumped again. And they were suddenly head-deep in swirling water.

Mart let out a yell of warning to the stage jangling into the stream behind him, but it was cut short by a mouthful of muddy water. He dropped the reins and kicked free of the saddle to let the horse swim, dropping back to catch the reins for a hand hold that would pull him through the flood. But a wiry, tangled clump of willows, washed loose from the creek bank higher up, snagged his legs and twisted about his body, snarling him like a catfish in a net. He went under, pulled down by the willows.

A dozen yards downstream he managed to kick free and fight his way to the surface, choking for breath. Even through the ringing in his ears, and above the roar of the flood, he heard the yells from the stage and the threshing of horses going down.

Britt's urgent call was lost in Tige Hule's yell of stark fear. Then came the creaking splash of the stagecoach going over in deep water.

"Alda!" Mart yelled, gulping froth and mud. He clawed frantically against the stream. "Alda—" But a thick cottonwood log, riding the flood, caught him full in the face.

He went down again, twisting and writhing like the driftwood that rode the stream with him.

TIGE HULE was first to leave the overturning coach. He could not swim a stroke, but insane fear of being tangled, of going down with the stage, made him throw away his shotgun and dive high and far past Britt's head into the muddy water. He went down like a rock and came up strangling. But the very same tree that had forced Mart to jump the roan still hung in the flood. Hule caught its branches and clung fast.

Regaining his breath, he pulled head and shoulders out of water. Next he felt to be sure he still had the sixgun in his holster. Reassured, he turned to watch the floundering of the horses and people he had just deserted.

Buff Britt dropped the lines and stayed with the coach as it turned over. Clawing with helpless fingers, he tried to reach the door latch to wrench it open before the passengers were trapped inside. He had not even reached the door when a line, tangled around his ankle, yanked him away into the flood.

He made one more attempt to swim back to the coach, but the current was too strong. Then he was snarled in willow brush and fighting for his life.

Inside the coach, at the first lurch of the wheels that spelled trouble, Tucker Jones sprang into action. While the drummer sat round-eyed and frozen and Perry Sillby shook in a fit of trembling, the lean, patched drifter jumped for the door latch, braced himself and reached for Alda McClain's hand. He waited only a second to be sure which way they were rolling, then he heaved open the door. With the agility of lean-limbed monkey on a swinging trapeze, he came scrambling up out of the sinking rig, half-helping, half-dragging the girl up with him.

"Off we go," he said lightly. "Watch out for the pair of horses swimming—" Still holding Alda's hand, he stepped into the water and struck out for the nearest solid shape of ground downstream.

Milo Bower clung to his seat until the coach rolled far over and the open door showed a patch of night sky. Then frantically he came to life. Kicking Perry Sillby in the face in his wild efforts, he hauled himself up and flung his legs over the door sill.

Chill water boiled up around him, and he gasped and cried out in sudden panic. Instinctively, he reached back into the coach as though to find protection. But everywhere there was only water.

Perry Sillby sat like a sodden lump in the corner of the stage. The vehicle rolled over and sank into the flood, and the water rushed in, gurgling around him, slapping him in the face, literally lifting him out of his corner.

He floated easily on the inrush of water, and memory flashed back as strong as yesterday—he was a boy again in the old swimming hole below the mill, back in the Ohio valley of better years. He quickly paddled into upright, comfortable position and floated up as the water filled the coach, pushing the drummer off into the current.

There was a swirl of down-drag as the vehicle sank, and for a moment Sillby had to fight to stay up, but instinct carried him through—the boys *would*, sneak into the mill race. Once as a lad he had been dragged down, carried under the big wheel, and the experience left him scared senseless for a week. But he lived through it, a hero in the eyes of the other youths of the valley, such a hero that, in his dreams, he deliberately dove under the flashing wheel a dozen times to win the admiration of his dream-girl.

Now, paddling along easily in the flood of Big Spring Creek, Sillby chuckled, and an unaccustomed grin wrinkled his weak features. This was like the good old days. Too bad it was night and nobody to see him.

UNTIL it grounded on a bar in midstream, Tige Hule stayed with his floating tree. As soon as his boots gripped firm gravel, he let go the branches and splashed on up out of the flood water.

The clouds covering the moon were gradually melting out, letting down a pale light once more. Hule found himself on a gravel shoal thickly overgrown with shoulder-high willows.

His first act was to check his gun. He blew the water out of the barrel and took out each cartridge and shook it to be sure no water had seeped in. Drying the weapon as well as he could with his hands, he checked the mechanism and reloaded, a twist of satisfaction to his thin lips. The cartridges had been well greased. The gun would fire.

Next he explored the little island. It was scarcely two rods long by a rod wide, but dense with willows, some limber and wiry, other dead and brittle, all rain-soaked. Hule worked his way through the willows to the lower end and back up the other side of the bar. Almost at the upper end, he stopped short and reached to his holster. A figure had moved in the shadow of overhanging branches.

Hule waited, gun in hand, until the man turned his face to the moonlight. It was Perry Sillby, calmly emptying the water out of his boots.

"Perry!" Hule grunted. "I damn near plugged you!"

Sillby scrambled to his feet, one boot still in his hand.

"Tige—I'm sure glad to see you!" he blubbered. "I thought everybody was drowned or washed away and I was all alone here—"

"Get your boots on!" Hule cut in. "We've got a job finding that strongbox before somebody else gets it!"

"In all this water—"

"Use your head. This flood won't last. When it's over, we're going to be boss of the show. We're to be the only ones here. You still got your gun?"

Sillby nodded, struggling with a boot. "But we'll have to get horses, Tige—"

Hule held up his hand for quick silence. There was a man in the water at the upper end of the island. The dripping figure emerged slowly, staggering in the current. He seemed to discover the island for the first time and started toward it, his feet dragging.

"It's that fellow you fought with!" Sillby whispered. "It's the same one without his mackinaw coat—"

"It's Mart Wolford!" Hule gritted.

"You mean you fought Mart Wolford—the same Mart Wolford who's getting the opals shipped to him?"

"Shut up and get set!" Hule cut in. "He'll be coming down past the willows. You watch this side and I'll take the other side of the island. When he comes within reach, club him down!"

Hule worked his way quietly across the gravel bar to a good hiding spot on the other side, where he could surprise anybody moving along that edge of the island. He could hear Mart coughing and retching beyond the willows, trying to rid himself of the mud and alkali scum he had swallowed. Finally came the crunch of boots on gravel that told of movement.

HULE crouched down, waiting. This would be easier than he had ever planned, and safer. And nobody could ever connect him with the killing. Mart Wolford would be just another flood victim. He took a deep breath. In another few minutes he would be free forever from the Wolfords.

Then he had only to be sure that Buff Britt had drowned and there would be no witnesses against him. Montana Territory would be a good place to live.

For a time there was no sound on the island except the roar of the flood and the swish of water against rock and willows. Then the crunching of boots took up again, moving toward the other side of the bar.

Hule cursed under his breath. He could almost feel his gunbarrel crashing down on Wolford's skull—now he might miss the chance. It would be up to the clumsy saloon bum.

There was a pause, then a rustle and thump and a crashing of willows. Hule strained his ears, but the hiss and gurgle of water drowned all else. He could only wait.

After a moment, steps sounded, pushing boldly through the willows toward him. He cocked his gun.

"Tige! Hey—Tige!" It was Sillby's quavering voice.

"Right here, damn it!" Hule answered sharply. "Did you get him? Did you finish him off?"

Sillby nodded in the moonlight, his chin trembling.

"I knocked him cold. He—he didn't have a gun. I checked—"

"Where did you leave him? You shoved him back in the crick, didn't you? You didn't leave him to come to—"

Sillby stared. "You said club him."

Hule choked out an oath. "You stupid son of a donkey—I'll finish him off myself!" He brushed Sillby roughly aside.

A crackling noise further downstream arrested both men. Sillby pointed. "What's that there in the crick?"

Somebody was moving along the edge of a larger island plain in the growing moonlight. He seemed to be struggling with some object that floated low in the water.

"It's the strongbox!" Hule gasped. "Some dirty rustler's trying to make off with our haul!" He cast a quick glance toward the other side of the little gravel bar where Mart Wolford lay. "Time to finish him off later," he decided. "Come on before that jasper loses our valuables for us!"

Hule led the way, crashing through willows to the lower end of the gravel bar. He waded out into the water up to his belt, holding his gun high over his head. From there on, he could find no bottom under his feet.

He turned on Sillby. "Can you swim?" he asked.

Sillby nodded.

"Then help me across to that chunk of land." He backed up a step, waiting for Sillby. "I hurt my back when we tipped over," he added, lying to save his pride, "and I'm afraid to tackle it."

Sillby studied the stream. The current shifted here, so that the island lay around a slight bend. It was a good-sized piece of ground, well up out of the flood. It was dotted with willow and rose-bush clumps. Only about fifty feet of swift water separated them from the nearest point.

"I don't know if I can make it," he said finally.

"You've got to!" Hule retorted. He took a firm grip around Sillby with his free arm and they pushed into the flood.

MILO BOWER lost his derby hat when the stage went down. He nearly lost his life. He went under and swallowed a pint of Big Spring Creek water, along with several ounces of assorted gumbo and alkali soils. But at the last minute he fought back his panic.

He clawed his way to the surface and grabbed a smooth pole of cottonwood that floated past. Hooking both arms over the pole and kicking mightily, he rode the flood.

But a new fear gripped him. Somewhere downstream—he had no idea how many miles—the creek emptied into the Missouri River. A man could never expect to cruise down the mighty muddy Missouri on a cottonwood pole!

He strained his eyes in the semi-darkness for some sign of land, and tried to guide his slippery log out of the current. But a thick, square object floating low in the water banged his knees. Desperately he worked to push it away, fearful of being thrown off balance and losing what little chance he had of survival.

The twist of the currnt kept the bulky object close against him in spite of his efforts, until he had to risk one hand to fight it off. His fingers touched the metal binding, the reinforced corners, and instantly he recognized the strongbox.

With only one small parcel in the strongbox, the empty air space kept it afloat in spite of the metal bindings.

Milo Bower stared at the box, almost awash in the current, and he saw only opals, shimmering stones of rainbow color. All the wild dreams he had built through the dark hours in the stagecoach came flooding back. All the pictures the drifter's opal descriptions had created swam again before his eyes—and it was all here at his finger tips.

Forsaking all caution, he floundered astride the box and gripped it with his knees, riding it down the stream like a horse wrangler astride a green bronc. He balanced himself easily with the pole now, and a reckless grin creased his round face. He was drifting away with a fortune. Now he would be the rainbow wrangler instead of some ignorant cowhand who could

never appreciate the beauty of costly gems.

Now more than ever he had to find a way to get out of the flood. He had a fortune as well as himself to save.

Staring ahead, he could make out the bulk of a rise of land. It had to be an island, because the current was carrying brush and driftwood to either side. But island or not, it offered solid footing. Once on firm ground he could build a raft, something steady enough to hold the strongbox and himself. Then he could drift on to safety, even if it meant riding the old Missouri.

Splashing and kicking, he guided himself and his clumsy load closer and closer toward the island. Willows whipped his bare head, scraping through his thin, straight hair. But the water was deep and the current strong.

He grabbed at passing branches, skinned his hands and ripped away twigs. At last, at the far tip of the land, the heavy box snagged on a jutting willow root and swung into the bank. Bower slid into the stream up to his neck and grabbed a handle at the end of the chest.

But the bank was steep, almost vertical, and the box had taken in water until it weighed more than a man could lift. Bower groaned and let it slide back into the flood. He would have to build his raft and bring it to the box, he decided, unless he could open the box and remove the treasure.

HE CAST ABOUT for some kind of tool to break the lock. But not even a fair-sized stone rewarded his groping. And if he did get the chest open, he worried, what would happen to the contents if it tipped into that swirling water? Better to keep it intact, he decided, until he could open it at his leisure far down the stream.

Ripping off his tie, he bound the handle of the chest to a stout willow root close against the bank. Empty-handed then, he pulled himself up the bank and onto flat ground.

Clumps of willow and wild rose cast black shadows across the island. Bower had to search each clump, each dark patch to discover that he had no material large enough to build his raft. The only answer was to wade back into the stream and catch logs and sticks as they drifted past.

The work progressed slowly. Minutes went by while he waited for sticks large enough to be useful and yet small enough to handle. But eventually they came, and one by one, he dragged them up the bank and laid them side by side in an open space and bound them together with strips torn from the tail of his coat.

Milo Bower froze rigid in his tracks

It was slow, grueling work, but it gave a man time to think, to look into the future. And such a future as Milo Bower saw for himself, he had never dared dream.

Why, he asked himself, should he go on being a traveling man? Why should he spend his days batting around over the wide open spaces in trains and boats—and hard-riding, cramped, uncomfortable, dangerous and downright undependable stagecoaches such as the one that had just dumped him into a flood of muddy water a half-mile wide? Why should he go on working at all?

He could buy a little home at the edge of some quiet Eastern town and settle down, maybe find a wife. Or he could buy a small store in some thriving community and go right on making money. That was the best idea. Anything else was like a gambler quitting paper-rich after only one good haul. A man could never be content to quit entirely.

He could pass up the merchants who always gave him a shabby deal. He could stay at better hotels, maybe take in a show at the opera house on occasion. And girls—a warm glow flooded over him at the thought of women that even the chill stream could not dispel. Maybe he should save out a few more opals. With a sparkling rainbow gem you could buy a chorus girl!

He dragged his thoughts back from the dazzling future, forced his mind to the task at hand. The raft was almost ready. Another good stick or two and he could load up and drift.

For only a brief moment did his conscience twinge as he remembered the rightful owner of the gems. But what did a cowboy need with opals? And they would have been lost anyhow if he had not caught the box floating away in the flood. They were his by right of salvage—and his they would remain.

The only spot he could find to launch his raft was a shallow drop in the bank a hundred feet upstream from where he had tied the strongbox. He dragged the awkward craft down into the water and anchored it firmly to a willow with the last of his coat.

Then there was the final plunge into the current and wading in neck-deep water to retrieve the strongbox. He yanked loose the tie that held it and grabbed a handle. It was water-logged and heavy, but time was running short and the moonlight growing brighter. Bower braced himself in the mud and heaved against the weight. Inch by inch he worked it back upstream, closer and closer to the raft.

The water was shallower there, only waist-deep. He dodged behind the strongbox and shoved it ahead of him, up the bank beside the raft. And a hand reached out from the shadows and pulled it the rest of the way.

Milo Bower froze rigid in his tracks. The sweat running down his ribs was suddenly as cold as ice. For a full minute he could not move, a sodden little figure standing in muddy water, hatless, coatless, his shirt streaked and torn and his thin, straight hair plastered to his round head.

Then he found his nerve and tried to duck into the shadow of the willows. But the hand that had grabbed the strongbox appeared again—it held a gleaming .45. And behind it crouched Tige Hule, the killer-lust plain in his yellow eyes.

Milo Bower stared, hypnotized, into the black muzzle of the gun. The weapon never wavered.

Bower put up his hands. "No!" he begged. He tried to back away. "No—the box is all yours—"

A blinding light trembled in the gun muzzle. Milo Bower saw it coming. Then he settled down into the water and the light went out—and there was nothing.

BUFF BRITT drifted, half-conscious, in the flood. He was almost beyond caring to save himself. When he finally lodged in a pile of sticks and debris against a willow clump, he had barely enough strength and the instinct to drag his head above water.

He must have lost consciousness entirely for a time then, because the next he remembered the clouds were gone and the moon shone brightly on a big island of high ground only a short distance away.

Britt tried to move. It was sheer agony to his stiff joints. But he had to reach that high ground, he realized. Another spell in the cold water would finish him.

Slowly, carefully, he flexed his arms and legs, forced his limbs to do his bidding. Though his feet were still like dead weights, he gathered his strength and struck out for the island.

The current whisked him away like a straw in the flood. He nearly gave up—then a memory prompted him and he swung upstream, quartering into the current so that it drove him sideways toward the island even while he lost ground. He swept into a willow at the very tip of the island and caught a hand hold. Minutes later, he was able to pull himself up to solid ground where he slumped, exhausted.

The crashing echo of a .45 jarred him to sudden attention. He stumbled to his feet, his stiff joints forgotten, and instinctively reached to his own holster. Surprisingly enough, his gun was there. He took both stiff thumbs to cock the hammer.

Keeping to the water's edge, below the bank, he started to circle the island. The shot had seemed to come from the other side. It could have been a friendly shot, he realized, maybe a call for help. It could have been only a warning. But a hunch seemed to tell him that the .45 that spoke had taken a human life.

Halfway along the island he heard voices and climbed the steep bank to the shadow of a thin, wispy willow clump.

Tige Hule and Perry Sillby were lifting the water-logged strongbox onto Bower's handmade raft. Britt crouched in his patch of shadow, stiff finger on the trigger, every nerve tense.

"Lift your end!" Hule ordered sharply as Sillby slipped in the mud. "Put some beef to it!"

"When do we split the treasure?" Perry Sillby inquired.

"Not till we're a damn long ways from here—and I've had a chance to finish Mart Wolford."

They settled the box in the middle of the raft, checked the coat-strips that held it to the bank, and climbed up to higher ground. They were directly across the narrow island from Britt, hardly thirty feet away.

"If you had finished the job—" Hule complained.

Britt straightened up and stepped out of the shadow.

"I have a job to finish myself," he gritted, keeping his gun steady on Hule. "Where's Mart Wolford?"

The two men froze speechless.

"Speak up, Hule—or I'll gut-shoot you, so help me!"

"You're bluffing." Hule stood straight, but his voice quavered. "You can't shoot!"

Britt hesitated. "Why do you want to finish off Mart? Is it because you're afraid he'll learn who shot his dad?"

Hule stiffened. "You're crazy as a coot! You don't know a damn thing—"

"I know enough—" A sudden tension in Hule warned Britt. Hule was going for his gun.

Buff Britt squeezed his numb finger to the trigger, a prayer for strength on his lips. The hammer snapped down. But the wet cartridge failed to fire.

DESPAIR flashed through Britt like an electric charge. Desperately he caught both thumbs on the hammer to cock for another try. But even before the hammer was back to half-cock, Hule's gun was in his hand and he fired.

Britt felt the bullet strike. It rocked him on his heels. He felt numb all over—but he still dragged on the hammer. Another fraction of a second and he could let go.

Gone now was the worry about a trip to California that he could never make. And the dragging years of rheumatic pain he had dreaded—already there was no pain. The old buffalo was going down. He had only one more chore to finish with his last ounce of strength.

Hule's second bullet struck him low, and the moonlight began to waver before his eyes. But the hammer was back. He let it slip from under his thumb, and he could still feel the wild jolt of the gun, the heavy flash and roar. He had finished his work. A wave of warm satisfaction washed over

him—and washed him down into oblivion. His stiff knees buckled and he pitched back into the swirling flood.

Buff Britt could not stay long enough to see that his bullet had missed Tige Hule by three feet, that it had struck Perry Sillby instead, just an inch above his belt buckle. Nor could Britt know of the look of smug satisfaction on Tige Hule's pasty face as Perry Sillby sat down suddenly and died, his heavy gun falling into the tall wet grass. . . .

Mart Wolford lay in a pile of crushed willow twigs, his feet in the stream. Long minutes dragged by before he began to regain consciousness. Even then he lay still, half-alive, while the water rose slowly another inch or two over his boots.

The sound of a shot came dimly to his ears, and he stirred. After a time, more shots sent echoes across the water. Mart started up, his head nearly splitting with the motion.

Somebody was moving on the little gravel bar behind him. He whirled, crouching in the screen of willows. Pain shot crazy lights across his eyes, but in time they subsided and he could make out a figure kneeling, working with something. Suddenly a match flared and went out.

"Alda!" Mart cried. "Alda!" It was Alda McClain, right there on the gravel bar with him—unless the blow on the head had effected his mind. He stumbled toward the moving figure.

"Mart! Mart—you're all right!" The girl jumped to catch him in her arms. "You didn't move—I couldn't lift you. I was trying to start a fire—maybe it would bring help."

"Alda!" Mart reeled from the sudden rush of blood to his head. "How did you get here?"

"Mart, sit down. Please! You're shaking." Alda helped him to a hummock of roots and grass on the edge of the bar. "If I could only warm you, but we're both so wet—"

"Alda—you knew me!" The sudden realization made Mart turn and stare incredulously into the girl's eyes. "You knew me in spite of—"

"Of course I knew you, poor darling!" She reached with gentle fingers to brush the wet hair back from his forehead. "I'll confess I didn't at first. You looked so wild and violent! I was afraid of you!"

"Alda, I'm sorry—"

"You had to be violent, fighting off that terrible Hule person—but in the stagecoach I recognized you. And something in my heart told me I couldn't be wrong."

"But you didn't let me know. I wouldn't have gone on acting—"

"You didn't want the rest of the passengers to know you, did you, Mart? I had a feeling you didn't, by the way you hunched into your coat collar and kept so quiet. Then they told about the box of opals and I understood. I'm sorry, Mart, that the stage tipped over and lost them for you."

"Forget the strongbox, Alda. All that's important is that you're here! I can hardly believe it!" He pushed back to arm's length to look at her in the expanding light.

A FAINT pink glow in the eastern sky now supplemented the moonlight. Dawn was not far distant, and already it brought out objects more clearly, almost adding a trace of color.

Alda still wore her hat. It was wet, discolored and misshapen, but she had kept it pinned securely to her neat, silky-blonde hair. Her clothes were muddy and torn and one smooth rounded arm peeped through a ripped sleeve, but she still managed to look trim and tidy.

She colored under Mart's close scrutiny. "Please, Mart!" she begged. "I'm an awful sight! Don't—"

Mart laughed softly. "The most wonderful sight in the world to me! I still can't believe it. How did you ever get to this miserable gravel bar? I didn't see a soul here when I—"

Mart suddenly remembered the bump on the head, and he touched the swelling carefully with his fingers, wincing at the pain. Somebody right here in this isolated patch of willows had struck him down. He glanced quickly around him. Whoever it had been could still be hiding out, waiting to strike again.

"There was nobody here but you, when I found you," Alda explained, reading his look.

And Alda would surely not have struck him, Mart knew, even by mistake. He felt a quick tightening of the throat at even allowing the thought to enter his mind.

"The thin man with the patches and the odd accent helped me out of the stage coach when it tipped over," Alda went on. "He was very calm and businesslike, and I didn't have time to be afraid. We just jumped into the water and swam."

"I didn't know you could swim."

Alda laughed. "I'm afraid there are a lot of things you don't know about me! That's what you get for being so shy the first year you were in the East. I won a swimming race at Mrs. Snyder's School for Girls on the lake."

"Thank the Lord for Mrs. Snyder's School for Girls!"

"We were doing very well—here in the flood, I mean—when two of the horses drifted into us. We got separated then and I don't know what happened to the man with the patches. I found a little piece of muddy ground to cling to until it melted away into the water and I drifted on down here."

Alda tugged at her torn wet sleeve and tried to straighten her collar. "I'm sorry I have to look so soggy and bedraggled on our first meeting in the West."

"You're beautiful! Look at me—why do you suppose I hid my head when I saw you in the coach? I was afraid you'd think the wild man had broken out of the circus!"

"Darling, I'm glad I saw you in the rough. If I'm going to marry a Wild West rancher, I want to know what he'll look like between Sundays."

Mart touched the cut on his head. It was still bleeding slightly. "I hope," he ventured, "that I won't look like this often."

"Mart—your head! I can see now that the light is better. Let me take care of it!" Alda quickly tore a strip from her petticoat and stepped to the stream's edge to moisten it. "Mart!" she cried. "The water's rising. The flood is getting worse!"

MART SIGHTED out over the level of muddy water. In places it was almost above the tallest willows. "Big cloudburst in the hills last evening," he explained. "The peak of the flood is just reaching us."

He hunched down at the edge of the gravel bar while Alda bathed the wound and washed the drying blood from his hair.

"Why, this cut looks as though somebody struck you with something sharp," Alda exclaimed. "I thought you had bumped your head in the stream—"

"I believe it was a gunbarrel. Plenty hard enough."

"What a country! I'm so sorry, Mart. But why did they do it? Why should anyone be so brutal?"

"Maybe they thought I had the opals."

"If this is what having precious gems means, I'm almost glad they're gone—except for your loss. Did you have any knowledge of what was in that strongbox? Was it really worth such bloodshed?"

Mart hesitated. "Yes," he said finally. "I have a complete description of the shipment. There are some very valuable and beautiful finished stones ready for mounting in jewelry, and quite a large parcel of unfinished opal of top quality. My mother's brother went to Australia years ago. He was there when they discovered opal in Queensland and went in with one of the first opal buyers. He found it so interesting that he started collecting rare pieces then and there."

"I'm sorry for your sake, Mart, that it's lost. I know your uncle would want you to have it because you would treasure it as he did—but you're safe, anyway. They didn't kill you for the stones, and that's all that counts. When I look at your poor head—"

A chill wind came up then with the dawn, sweeping across the flood waters. Mart's teeth began to chatter. "I had hoped to see you wearing the best opals with your party dresses. Some of the uncut stones I would sell. Maybe enough to be sure you had plenty of dresses to go with the opals, and enough to buy you a piano. You see, I haven't forgotten the night you sang and played at your aunt's party."

"I didn't think you had even noticed me that night, you stayed so far away!" She put an arm around his shoulders. "Mart—you're shaking! This cold and the loss of blood— If I could only have started a fire. But my matches were wet—and so is this worthless wood."

Mart grinned in spite of the shivers. "You surprise me that you even carry matches."

Alda's green eyes flashed knowingly. "Must I confess that I read every book I could find about the Wild West before I left home. I came prepared—all except a revolver!"

Mart stood up and turned his back to the wind. "I can see now," he remarked, "that I didn't know what a prize I was getting."

Alda came to stand before him, and her eyes met his. "Mart," she said timidly, "if I try hard, do you think I can be a satisfactory wife for you?"

Mart caught her in his arms. Then he hesitated, pushing back. "Do you mind the beard?"

"Silly!" Alda whispered. She flung her arms around his neck and hugged him tight. "After two years and thousands of miles—" Their lips met, and the chill dawn wind swept by unnoticed.

Unobserved also was the muddy water lapping up over the gravel bar. It hissed through the willows and washed away the tiny bundle of sticks where Alda had tried to build a fire. It poured across the ground, tearing out great chunks.

HELLO!" came a thin voice from the upstream end of the shoal. "Sorry to pick such a blasted poor time to break in, but I was washed off my hummock."

Mart and Alda turned to meet the newcomer. It was Tucker Jones, thin as a skeleton in his clinging wet patches. His teeth rattled like dominoes.

"I s-s-swum floods on the Bulloo," he stuttered, "and the Lachlan and the Murray—but I can't recall I ever was so c-c-cold—"

Mart took a step backward in the rising water and felt the ground cave away. "Looks like you picked a poor place for refuge. We'll all be swimming in a minute."

Alda looked up quickly to meet Mart's eyes. "Will it rise much higher?" she asked quietly. "Is there real danger?"

Mart scanned the horizon. "My guess is the flood is almost past. But we'll have to find a bit of higher ground for now." He studied the long, narrow island downstream. "There's a likely spot, and it should be easy swimming."

The island still stood high out of water. With its willow clumps and wild rose bushes, it looked safe and solid in the growing light. A wisp of blue smoke hung over one of the rose clumps.

"Look!" Mart exclaimed. "Somebody has a fire going. We can thaw the frost out!"

Alda shivered. "Is it safe?"

"We have no choice. It's the only high spot in sight!"

Gripping Alda's hand, Mart stepped off into the flood. . . .

Tucker Jones held back. He waited until Mart and Alda had drifted away, heads bobbing in the current. They grew smaller and smaller, mere dots of the shifting, dawn-pinked surface. Then they had reached the point of the island and were climbing up out of the stream.

The water swirled up around the drifter's patched knees, threatening to sweep him down. Still he waited, studying a strange object that bobbed and swayed with the current alongside the island about halfway down its length.

At last he pushed off, swimming frantically toward his goal. The current tossed him around like an empty pod. The bulk of the island loomed over him, and he fought the stream until he tasted blood in his mouth. When he touched ground he had missed the mark by fifty feet.

He crouched under the bank, listening, waiting, while the flood poured past. Nobody appeared on the ledge above to look for him. Carefully, cautiously, he worked his way back upstream along the crumbling bank.

And there it was—the strongbox resting on a ready-made raft.

Jones hunched at the water's edge. Excited voices came from the level of ground above him, angry voices, threatening voices. But none came closer his way. He had still not been discovered.

Scarcely breathing, he examined the chest. The lock was unbroken. The contents was safe.

Hot elation surged through him, enough to drive away all the chill of the long night. Here was a fortune in opals, a true treasure chest—and all he had to do was loosen the raft, climb aboard and drift away. It was like finding a lump of gold in your tea!

A bitter lifetime of frustration and disappointment flooded his memory as he worked at the knots in the coat sleeves that held the raft. Bad luck had been his lot, all across half the world— always rotten luck.

BUT HIS LUCK had changed. There stood the proof, solid and real and his for the taking. He chewed at the wet and stubborn sleeve knots with his thin, sharp teeth.

Now he could go home in style—no more working passage before the mast, jumping ship and dodging the magistrate. He could go home and spend his life in the shade of a coolibah.

And the personal insults he could avenge —tight-handed Jim Black with his bar on the Bulloo, refusing an empty drover a beer. Now he could buy out the whole pub. Or—Black liked his whisky—he might get the man so drunk he would fall into a drysink and break a leg.

But the row at the opal ridge—that was a fight. Stoning a man out of the field for stealing a rotten chunk of the stuff. He could feel the lumps on his head yet from the rain of quartz gibbers.

And the Paroo Hill garrottings—perhaps he would not go back ever to Queensland. The police magistrate had a long memory, and the old crowd would drag him in. But there was plenty of fun yet to be had in the towns of New South Wales.

At last the tough cloth strips parted, and the raft swung free. But he dared not board it. The dawn was coming on full and the light was strong. And he was too near to the urgent voices above him.

Patiently he worked the raft downstream past the bulges of wet clay on the soggy bank, down past willow roots and hanging snags. Neck-deep in the water, it took all his strength to keep the current from snatching his prize away and dragging him with it.

Long minutes later he cleared the lower end of the island and there was only open water ahead, acres of it, rolling and twisting under the light of dawn. Jones looked back. The brush on the island hid any sign of life, and off to the right were only bare, empty hills pushing up from the edge of the flood. To the left, level ground spread beyond the swollen stream, and it was brilliant green with thick, wet grass. In plain sight now, three of the stage horses grazed quietly, parts of the harness still dragging. Near the harnessed horses, the saddle horse that Mart Wolford had ridden stood, reins dragging, waiting.

Tucker Jones allowed himself a grin. Not a living soul in sight.

Cautiously he pulled himself up onto the stick-and-pole raft. It sank low under his weight, but the binding held and it kept its level. He eased himself forward until his thin legs straddled the strongbox and the center of weight rested in the middle of the raft.

"Off we go!" he whispered to himself, and he loosed his hold on the willow branch he had been gripping.

The current caught the raft and spun it away, rocking dizzily. The drifter shook his head, casting about to get his bearings. A man could get seasick on such a craft.

He located the island, but it had already dwindled to a mere blob of brown and rusty green far astern. And ahead lay only miles of winding stream leading finally down to the muddy Missouri.

Tucker Jones wrapped both arms around the strongbox and laughed aloud. And the sound rolled flatly over the water.

"I've got a ruddy fortune," he sang in his high, wheedling voice, "down in my tucker bag. I'm off to buy a thoroughbred to carry home my swag!"

WHEN the rising flood had washed over their little willow-grown gravel bar, and Mart led Alda down into the current, there was a doubt in his mind—he still felt weak and unsteady from the blow on the head, and the stream was swift.

But he had no alternative. They left Tucker Jones standing ankle-deep in the flood and plunged in. The chill water, instead of numbing him, actually revived him. It cleared his head and quickened his blood. He struck out boldly for the island and felt an intense thrill of pride to find Alda keeping pace with him. The current swept them on at a crazy speed, but it was all in their favor. It brought them up on the end of the island.

Mart clambered out on the bank and helped Alda up. Looking back, he saw Tucker Jones dive into the stream and start swimming. Then he forgot the man. The fragrant smell of woodsmoke came to him, sweet cottonwood smoke.

"Let's get to that fire!" he said, teeth chattering. "I'll bet old Buff Britt built it just for us!"

They climbed to the level ground and hurried, dripping, through the willow clumps in the direction of the smoke.

It was a small fire, but burning brightly in the very center of a clearing in the brush. Mart spread his hands gratefully to the heat, drinking in the rich smell of the burning cottonwood limbs. Not a sign of life stirred around them. The fire-builder must be after more wood, Mart thought.

Alda stood back from the fire, uncertain. She glanced all around at the clumps of wild roses and scanned the open paths. Suddenly she gasped and stared, horrified, past Mart.

He whirled, following her eyes. There lay a sprawled body almost hidden in the deep grass. In two strides he reached the spot and looked down into the lifeless face of Perry Sillby.

Alda came up beside him, but he put out his arm, stopping her. "This is no place for you, Alda."

"Mart—" Alda cried. "He's dead!"

"Dead," a hoarse voice behind them agreed. "Dead as a sausage!"

Mart and Alda whirled to face Tige Hule. He stood by the fire, a twisted grin on his face. He held a cocked .45 in his hand.

Mart motioned to the body on the ground. "Why?" he asked sharply.

"He stopped an argument."

"What about Buff Britt? Was he here too?" The feeling persisted in Mart's mind that the old stage driver must be some place on the island.

Hule pointed to the swirling flood waters. "Britt lost the argument."

"I don't believe you!" Mart retorted.

"So I'm a liar—but I hold the gun."

Alda took a determined step toward Hule. "You—you—" she gasped. "How many more people lost their lives?"

Hule showed his broken teeth again in a grin. "Let's say the little drummer was unlucky."

Three dead, Mart counted. He and Alda and the drifter with the patches were the only ones left—besides this yellow-eyed killer.

Mart swung forward. "What's your game, Hule?"

Hule lifted the gun, centered it on Mart's chest. "Steady," he cautioned. "I won't remind you again—"

"Point the thing some place else!" Mart gritted.

Hule laughed. "So I will!" He turned the weapon on Alda. "Now make a funny move and the girl gets it. I've been watching you two up on the gravel bar. So you're the gent she came West to marry!"

MART caught his breath and a wave of nausea tore through him. He froze in his tracks. Hule meant the threat. There was no limit. He looked at Alda, and the sick helplessness in him was a spreading, numbing pain.

Alda met his look, but her green eyes were expressionless. She shivered and spread her hands to the fire.

"If you'll excuse me," she remarked indifferently in Hule's direction, "I'll take down my hair and dry it here at the fire before I catch my death of cold." Ignoring the weapon pointed at her as though it did not exist, she reached up and unpinned her

water-stained hat and tossed it down into the grass. Her blonde, silken hair was done up in neat braids rolled into a circle on top of her head. She started loosening the ends of the braids.

Mart stared, breathless. Was it sheer, cold nerve, he wondered, or did Alda fail to realize the danger?

"What do you want with us, Hule?" he asked weakly.

Tige Hule brought his yellow eyes away from Alda's shining braids. "Maybe," he replied finally, "we got a score to settle."

"If you're after that strongbox, I haven't got it. It went down with the stage."

"Not quite," Hule countered. "I've got it. It's resting easy right down there—" He nodded toward the stream bank. "On a raft the drummer was obliging enough to build for me."

"Then why don't you take it and drift?"

"Not so fast. I've had the thing for an hour. But I had to wait to settle with you first. I couldn't swim upstream to get you, so I sat tight and you came to me."

"But why? I don't even know you."

"You sure about that?" Hule let his eyes wander back to Alda's hair for a moment. She was unwinding a braid. He turned on Mart, his yellow eyes narrowed. "I planned all along," he said coldly, "to shoot you down." He paused, studying Mart's face. "But waiting here, I got a better idee. You'll sign your ranch in the highwoods over to me first."

Mart's jaw dropped in sheer amazement. The man was plumb crazy. But the look on Hule's face backed up his words.

"What about the girl?" Mart countered. "What happens to her?"

Hule grinned and leered at Alda. "She came West to marry a rancher didn't she? And I'll have the Highwoods ranch—"

Mart winced. "You can't get away with it. You're crazy to think—" Helpless rage boiled in him until he trembled in every fiber. How could you deal with an armed madman?

"What makes you think," Alda said quickly, "that I'd marry a murderer?"

"It's been done before."

"Maybe a real tough, bloodthirsty murderer—the kind to give a girl shivers. But you—" She looked at Hule with a contemptuous curl of her lip. "Who did you ever kill?"

"I've killed plenty in my day!"

"In your day!" Alda mocked. "Who? The poor little drummer. An old, crippled driver. And now you'll kill Mart. Just an amateur, that's all you are. Just a rank beginner."

"I shot a gambler in Fort Benton."

"A gambler—you didn't even know his name—"

"His name was Baxter, and he was—"

"And who else? You mean that's *all?*" Alda put all the contempt she could muster into the question.

"And Jack Smiley in Copper Gulch—" Hule flared. "You bloodthirsty she-devil! And old Martin Wolford—and—" He stopped short, his face a frozen mask. Every blemish in his bad complexion stood out.

Mart's blood pounded through his veins in a raging fire. A chance, that was all he prayed for, just one chance at Tige Hule. He had to get the man to turn that gun away from Alda. Now he understood why Hule wanted to kill him, why he had started the fight back on the stage road. Hule had shot Martin Wolford—and he feared young Mart might guess the truth. He had to kill the whole Wolford clan to be sure.

ALDA'S eyes met Mart's for a split second, and there was an urgent pleading in them. But what could he do?

"Why did you shoot Martin Wolford?" Alda asked, a trace of a quaver in her voice. "You shot him in the back." Mart had explained it only once in his letters.

The words finally jarred through to Hule. "He was running away," he replied sourly, his eyes set on Mart's face.

"Why did you shoot him?" Mart repeated Alda's question, his voice a hoarse whisper.

Some of the swagger was coming back to Hule after the shock of being tricked into telling too much. "You want to know everything before I kill you." He cast a murder-

ous glance at Alda and back to Mart. "Old Martin Wolford called me a horse thief. I've stolen horses, but I didn't steal that one. He caught me with a Circle W bronc I bought from Alec Bondeau and he called me a horse thief—"

"So you shot him in the back," Mart whispered.

"He was wearing a six gun. All I had was a carbine in my saddle-boot. I had to wait till he rode away—"

Mart tensed to jump, but Alda's look held him a second longer. She was working with a braid of her hair, both hands in front of her. She kept her right hand held awkwardly stiff. Bracing herself, she leaned toward Hule.

"Mart!" Alda's desperate cry rent the air. She grabbed at the gun with her left hand and thrust it down and away. Her right hand she jabbed hard into the gunman's side.

Tige Hule yelled in rage—and his yell ran out into a high, thin scream of terror. The gun blazed down past Alda's skirt, and Hule doubled over to pull the hat-pin from his side.

At that instant Mart hit him. He struck with all his strength, and the blow lifted Hule off his feet, sent him sprawling back into a rose clump. Mart jumped the campfire and grabbed for Hule. But he misjudged the distance.

Hule rolled over and lashed out with a boot, tangling Mart's legs, tripping him full-length into the willows. When Mart scrambled up, Hule was already on his feet a club of cottonwood branch in his hand. He swung the club in a dipping arc as Mart dodged in, and it barely clipped the top of Mart's head. But it struck squarely over the gash made earlier by Perry Sillby's gunbarrel.

Mart saw stars and his knees buckled. The pain could not have been worse if the top of his head had been sliced completely away. He pitched forward. Vague moving shadows told him the club was coming down again, straight at him this time. He had barely enough momentum to dive under it. He fell against Hule, and the club slapped down on his back.

Clawing, gripping blindly, he carried Hule to the ground with him. They fell directly into the fire—and the gunman let out an agonized scream and threw Mart from him to escape the burning coals that ate through his shirt.

Mart had scant seconds of relief, but the pain was easing and his eyes cleared. Still groggy, he stumbled up in time to meet Hule as the man charged him anew. He stopped the gunman with a straight right.

But Tige Hule was fighting for his life now, and the odds were against him. He tore at Mart like the madman he was, insensible to pain. He kicked and gouged and clubbed. They were down as much as up—and dizzy as he was, Mart could only take the punishment and pray for strength to finish the job. He had more than his life at stake.

FOR THE FIRST time he knew the whole story behind his father's death. It was Tige Hule's sneaking bullet that had lodged in old Martin Wolford's lungs, breaking the old man down for the pneumonia that followed.

Old Buff Britt must have suspected—there was something in his tone when he asked Mart back at Cottonwood Junction what the name Tige Hule meant to him. Britt knew Tige Hule, knew the kind of man he was. Maybe that was why Hule shot the old stage driver here on the island—for he had never denied the shooting.

Mart said an extra prayer as he took Hule's wild jolts to the head. Out of the corner of his swollen left eye he caught a glimpse of Alda—she had retrieved Hule's fallen six gun and was trying to thumb back the hammer.

"No!" he gasped. "No—" She could get badly hurt.

His left eye was swelling shut now, and he walked into more of Hule's punches. But he had grown numb. They no longer hurt—or Hule was growing weaker.

They fought into the clear where the full light of dawn shone into the gunman's face, and Mart gasped in disbelief. He had cut the man to ribbons. One of Hule's eyes was a bloody mass. His mouth and

broken teeth were unrecognizable. His back and chest looked as though he had been horsewhipped. No wonder the man was giving out!

Mart's own face was no prize for looks now, he knew. But he had taken his share of the beating and his strength still held. Elation quickened the life in him when he knew he could see the fight through.

He slammed into Hule, drove the man back, putting every ounce of his strength into his fists to break Hule down. Hule went down, but he staggered up again. Mart hit him again, a wicked, lifting blow that carried Hule far back across the clearing. The gunman sprawled down across the body of Perry Sillby in the tall grass and lay still.

Mart tottered on his feet. Alda rushed up, still carrying Hule's heavy .45, and caught Mart's arm to steady him.

"Mart!" she whispered. "Oh, Mart—"

Mart reached to put an arm around her shoulders, to comfort her, but she stiffened. "Quick!" she cried, pointing.

Tige Hule was crawling, across the body of his one-time partner, reaching his right hand for the heavy gun which Sillby had dropped.

Mart grabbed the .45 out of Alda's hands and thumbed back the hammer. Hule already had the big weapon, was bringing it up, his face a bloody mask of yellow-eyed hate behind the sights.

MART fired. His bullet struck Hule in the right arm, smashing the bone. The big gun spilled from Hule's fingers.

But there was no surrender in Hule. Before the gun had touched the ground, he was reaching across with his left hand for a final desperate try. He nearly succeeded. Tall grass hid his move. He gripped the gun and tried a wild shot from the ground, but the bullet from the heavy weapon ripped harmlessly into the willows.

It was almost with relief that Mart ducked and triggered his second shot, and it struck Tige Hule between the eyes.

Mart threw the gun down and took Alda in his arms. Gently he led her away from the scene and held her quietly until her sobbing eased, when she regained her composure and insisted on washing and binding up his cuts.

"The strongbox!" Alda suddenly remembered. "Now you can get your opals—"

They went together to the side of the island Hule had pointed out, walking far around the two bodies. Only the ragged sleeves of the drummer's coat tied to the willows at the high watermark showed where the raft had been.

"The man with the patches!" Alda cried. "I caught a glimpse of him down here while we were there by the fire—"

Mart laughed. "Once again the strongbox is gone!"

"But those precious stones?"

"Yes—precious stones! Two good solid Montana prairie rocks picked up from the alley back of the express office in Billings. And a pair of worn and muddy shoes. That's what was in the strongbox." Then he sobered. "I reckon they were precious at that—the lives that were lost trying to steal them!"

"But Mart—" Alda objected.

"I suspected trouble. Too many of the wrong people knew about the shipment. So I rode into Billings and bought a pair of boots and rigged things with my friend in the express office to change parcels."

He led Alda around to the other edge of the island and pointed across the rapidly draining channel to the saddle horse—once Jingo Parker's horse—grazing quietly on the other side.

"See that shoe box behind the saddle? In it is the original shipment from Australia." He took her in his arms. "You'll still get your piano and your party dresses and opals!"

Alda's eyes were moist with pride. "I have not only the bravest man but the cleverest! Such a thorough plan—"

"I'm mighty glad part of the plan failed," Mart whispered. "And it put me on the same stagecoach with you!"

Alda's eyes told him that she agreed.

SMOKE SCREEN

By
Dorothy L.
Bonar

Nan crouched down, rifle in hand

KIT NEVER BROUGHT anything but trouble to those who loved him—even after he'd met the death he deserved

ALL THE WAY from the Triangle F, Ward Freeman cast uneasy glances at the girl sitting on the buckboard seat beside him. She hadn't uttered a sound or shed a tear, even when the first shovelfuls of dirt began to drop into Kit's grave. Then her face had worn the same white, frozen look that so deeply disturbed him now.

"Nan . . ." he began, and then stopped. How could a man say of a brother just

buried: He was no good! How could a man speak so to a girl in love with that brother?

She made no response. In the center of a sage flat ahead stood Britt's Post, the only settlement within a two-day ride. The smaller of its two buildings, set apart, was blacksmith shop and livery stable. The other, a large, ugly frame structure, housed a saloon and a general store. Above both, a few rooms to let passed muster as a hotel. At the saloon hitchrack several horsemen were dismounting.

"The posse!" exclaimed the girl, leaning forward. "But they've got no prisoner!"

Anger, born of helplessness, welled up in Ward. Posse was scarcely the word for the party that had ridden out on Joe Abcock's trail last night. There was not a lawman among them, nor had one been wanted.

"You wouldn't expect that bunch to bring Abcock in alive, would you?" he said bitterly.

Her glance was uncomprehending. It switched back to the men beating dust from nondescript range garb, while moving with weary eagerness towards the liquid refreshments waiting inside the saloon. One, noting the buckboard's advance, lifted voice to his companions and all turned back to meet it.

There was not a Double A hand among them, Ward noted. That was why Abcock had not dared stand fast and tell his story of the shooting. He had been a fool to ride into the post alone, considering the trouble shaping up between his Double A spread and Charlie Weaver's adjoining Walking W. Sitting into a poker game with Weaver and Kit had been sheer lunacy. Weaver had everything going his way now. That knowledge sat in his light gray eyes as they met Ward's brown ones briefly, before turning to the girl.

"He give us the slip, Miss Nan," he said.

"Where?" queried Ward.

Weaver put his hat back on a balding head. He was in his forties, dark and powerfully built, a man who was always reaching out for more than he had, but patient, and preferring the devious method to the direct in attaining his ends.

He said, "Near Snake Canyon. None of us knows that country like Abcock and a few others do. We figured we'd better come back for fresh horses, supplies, and a guide."

Ward felt an unpleasant thump inside. He was one of the "others" who knew the Snake Canyon country well. He and Sam Britt, Nan's father—sitting silently on the rear buckboard seat—had trapped in those parts their first years in this country. After an accident left him with a bad hip, Britt had invested his half of their fur money in his trading post, while Ward bought cattle. Because of that hip, it was impossible for Britt to sit a saddle any distance, which made Weaver's point clear.

Ward looked from one expectant face to another. The complacency in the Walking W owner's face brought Kit's last labored words back to him.

"Weaver'll try—to turn this—to his advantage. Don't let him. I palmed that ace—from bottom of deck—all right. You know me. Had this coming—long time . . ."

That had been Kit's one virtue—a complete, detached honesty with himself. He had never sought to justify his wrongdoing, nor to blame it on circumstances or the influence of others. And he had never wanted anyone else to pay the price of any guilt of his.

WARD SAID, "Send someone to Bakersville to contact the U. S. Marshal. I'll lead a posse he heads after Abcock."

"But that will take days!" Nan burst out.

"Abcock won't skip the country, leaving the Double A and all his cattle behind," Ward declared. "All he aims to do is hide out until things cool down. Then he'll come in so they can be straightened out."

"That's strange talk from a man whose brother has just been gunned down!" Weaver charged.

Ward's jaw hardened. Before he could reply, however, Nan's tugging at his coat caused him to turn her way. Her face was no longer frozen. It blazed with incredulity and accusation.

"You'd sit back—wait for a law that's two days away to deal with the man who murdered Kit?"

She said the name as though Kit had been some kind of god. Ward's bitterness returned.

Nan had a slim, curving body and a piquant face framed by golden-brown curls. In his eyes she was beautiful, and once she had liked knowing that. Once his dreams had been her dreams, too. Then Kit had come along with his irresistible charm, and though the reckoning he had courted for years had finally caught up with him, he had managed, as usual, to leave heartbreak in his wake.

Goaded, Ward poured out what he had previously been unable to say. "It wasn't murder! Kit cheated, and reached for his gun first when Abcock caught him! He told me so before he—"

Her look stopped him. As though he had turned into something unclean, she recoiled, then clambered over the wheel to the ground. Reading the same reaction in other faces, a sick feeling gripped Ward. . . .

It was only two weeks since Kit, whom he hadn't seen for eight years, had appeared out of nowhere. No one in this country knew Kit. They knew only the man he had seemed to be.

For a moment Ward wished desperately that he might recall his words. Then he remembered that Kit himself had wanted the truth told in order that a man who had shot in self-defense might not be branded a murderer. Kit had died holding fast to that single essence of justice and decency. Regardless of the light in which it placed him, Ward had to carry through.

"Do you think saying such a thing is easy?" he asked tightly. "If it wasn't true, why would I say it about my own brother?"

"Because you hated his guts for stealing your girl!" interrupted Weaver viciously. "Because you're a dirty, lying—"

Ward hurled his two hundred pounds of muscle and bone from the buckboard seat. As he struck Weaver and bore him to the ground he was dimly aware of frightened whinnies and hoof thuddings. Then everything faded save the unshaven face into which he smashed his fist. They rolled wildly about in a welter of dust until hands tore them apart.

Dragged to his feet, with both arms pinioned, Ward ceased struggling. Weaver rose slowly, wiping a bleeding mouth on the back of a hand.

"Tough, eh?" he mumbled and lurched forward.

But Sam Britt, his two hundred and fifty pounds formidable despite a limp, had descended from the buckboard. "We'll keep the fighting fair!" he snapped.

"But he the same as called me an' my boys liars!"

"That can be settled later!" declared Britt. "Ward's got the right idea, Weaver. Send for the U.S. Marshal. Let the law decide."

Weaver cursed. "We've got all the law we need in our guns and a rope!" he cried harshly. "It was a good enough kind to tame this range and drive out Injuns and rustlers. And it's good enough to deal with a dirty killer now! If Freeman ain't man enough to guide us into that Snake Canyon country—"

"Then I will!"

Ward's chest felt squeezed tight, for the speaker was Nan.

NAN'S EYES were like blue flames. She meant what she said, and she could do it. She had come from an Eastern boarding school to live with her father the last year Britt and Ward ran their mountain trapline. And she had lived in that high, wild region long enough to know it almost as well as either of them.

"Get your fresh horses and supplies," she told Weaver. "I'll be ready in—"

"You're not going, Nan!" her father said. "What are you thinking of anyway?"

"I am going!" Her voice and face were stony. "Abcock's got to pay for what he's done if I have to kill him myself!"

"That's enough!" roared Sam Britt. "It's no trip for a young girl—especially with a bunch of men."

"That's not important—"

"It is to me! And it will be to you when you come to your senses! You're staying

home where you belong, if I have to lock you in your room!"

Ward's chest ached. That was no way to deal with a girl in Nan's emotional state. Then, to his amazement, she suddenly burst into tears and ran inside.

Britt drew a deep breath. "Who'll ride for the marshal?" he queried.

Ward shook himself. "I will," he said.

"You'd better!" Weaver said in an ugly tone. "Give the air around here time to clear- so decent folks can breathe!" He jerked his head to his companions. "Pete—Patch! Come on, boys! Let's show him what we think of a dirty snake who'd help his brother's killer get away!"

"Hold it!" thundered Sam Britt.

But Weaver and his Walking W hands closed in swiftly. Ward got in a solid right to a jaw—a left to a stomach. Then he was overwhelmed by sheer force of numbers. He felt a rain of blows and tasted blood. Then his head seemed to snap off his neck, and all was black silence. . . .

He opened his eyes to bare rafters and roughly finished walls. He was in one of the upstairs rooms. Nan's touch was revealed in the gay patchwork quilt on the bed beneath him, and in the white scarf on a washstand. There were also ruffled curtains at a window through which lofty mountain peaks bulked against a pink-tinged sky—the reflection of a setting sun. He must have been out for some time.

Ward started to sit up. A chair creaked and Sam Britt leaned over him, pressing him down again.

"They worked you over pretty good before I could get my shotgun from behind the bar," he said. "Weaver's sure got it in for you bad."

Ward was glad to lie still once more. He felt sore all over and his head throbbed. He said, "Weaver still around?"

Britt shook his head. "They headed for the Double A to lay for Abcock. Figure he can't hide out long without grub and blankets, and that he'll try for 'em there. I sent that new helper of mine to Bakersville. When the law gets here—" He rose abruptly. "Soon as you're up to it, come downstairs. I'll put on the coffee pot."

Ward closed his eyes. Because they had been friends a long time, Britt would stand by him. But Britt, too, believed he was betraying his own blood out of jealousy and hate for a dead brother. Everyone would think so, the way things stood now. For Britt had been in his store, unpacking a new shipment of merchandise, when the poker game in the saloon had ended in gunplay. That made Weaver and his two punchers, Pete and Patch, the only witnesses. And their story falsely branded Abcock the one who had cheated and drawn his gun first.

Ward had been alone with Kit in his final moments. No one else had heard Kit's last words. No one was able to see what Kit—a wily opportunist himself—had foreseen so clearly.

IT WAS still a day of open range, with the threat of homesteaders as yet unknown. There was no legal ownership of grass and water. Both were there for anyone strong enough to take and hold them. Having recently secured a government contract for delivery of beef to the nearest Indian reservation, Weaver needed more range than his Walking W now controlled. Already there had been minor encroachments of his stock on Double A grass. He had been looking for a chance to crowd Abcock off and take over completely. With Abcock shot down or hanged, there would be nothing and no one to stop him.

Unable to lie still longer, Ward swung his feet to the floor. He felt better after dousing face and head in cold water. Avoiding his reflection in a mirror, he ran sinewy fingers through his dark hair and stepped into the hall.

He paused at Nan's door. There were no sounds from within. She had probably wept herself dry of tears. The thought wrenched at his heart and, impulsively, he knocked.

After a moment her voice called, "Who is it?"

"Ward. I've got to talk to you."

The door opened. Though her eyes were red from weeping, her expression was eager. "You've changed your mind about leading Weaver's posse?"

Ward's spirits sank lower. "No," he said. "All Weaver wants is to string Abcock up or shoot him. I can't help to do that when I know Abcock shot Kit in self-defense. Can't you understand? I didn't hate Kit. He was my kid brother and I looked out for him as long as he'd let me. But no one could hold him down. He killed his first man when he was only seventeen—a rancher he'd cheated at cards the same as he cheated Abcock. He's killed three others that I know of. The Rangers ran him out of Texas. He admitted he'd tried everything—bank robbery, stage holdup, cattle rustling, horse stealing. While he was alive, and doing no wrong here, I had to keep my mouth shut. But I can't hold back the truth now with an innocent man's life at stake. Wouldn't that make me as bad—or worse?"

He stopped, out of breath, and defeated by her expression. Nothing he'd said had made any impression. Slowly she closed the door.

A movement drew his attention to the top of the staircase. Sam Britt stood there holding a steaming tin cup.

"I was fetching you some coffee," said the trader. "Sure is a shock to hear such things about a man as likeable as Kit was. But when you think a minute, it figures. He was too likeable—too smooth. He never done a lick of work the two weeks he was here. And he was too well dressed and had too much money on him for a drifter."

Britt was silent for a moment. Then, nodding towards Nan's door, he added, "She'll start putting them things together, too, soon as she gets over this crying stage. Reckon any girl would of fell for Kit's flash at first. But I'll bet she'd soon have got over him. Nan's level-headed in a pinch. Give her a little time and she'll see it wasn't Kit she really wants. Just sit tight, son."

Cheered by his former partner's reborn faith in him, Ward permitted Britt to persuade him to stay overnight. It was a two-hour ride to Triangle F headquarters, and likely to prove an uncomfortable one so soon after the going-over Weaver and his boys had given him. Also, he was reluctant to face his own ranch crew as yet. Weaver would see that word of his conduct reached them quickly, and there were certain codes of loyalty their kind would forgive no man for breaking. If he could sit tight until the arrival of a lawman, maybe everything would work out after all.

NAN DID NOT come down to supper. Only Abcock's Double A foreman came into the post all evening. He had heard nothing from his boss and was growing anxious. Warned that Walking W was watching in the hope that he would establish contact with Abcock, he soon departed, frowning and swearing under his breath.

"If Walking W tries to move cattle onto Double A range before Abcock's status is settled, one way or another, there's going to be hell," declared Britt darkly. "Sure hope that marshal ain't too long getting here."

Ward carried that hope to bed. Eventually he dropped into an uneasy sleep. A pound of booted feet on uncarpeted stairs and hall, and a voice shouting his name, seemed part of a nightmare until a violent shaking of his shoulder forced his eyes open and he found Britt bending over him.

The room was gray with the first light of dawn, the air sweeping through an open window cold enough to make flesh tingle. Britt was fully dressed, his face a mask of dismay.

"Nan's gone!" he cried hoarsely. "She pulled out during the night!"

"How do you know?" demanded Ward. "Get hold of yourself, man!"

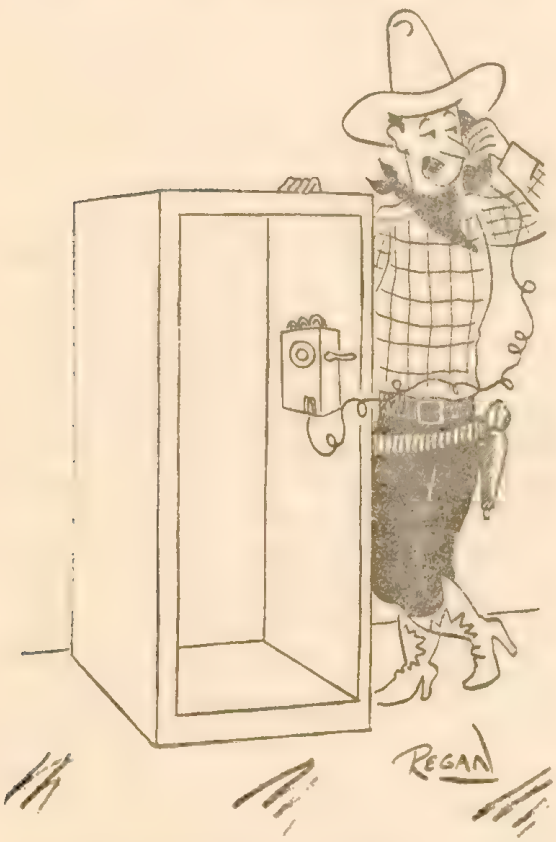
Britt tried to do so. After a moment he was able to speak more calmly. He was usually up first. It was his custom to build a fire and then call Nan. Wanting to be sure she was all right, he had followed his usual procedure this morning.

"But she wasn't there," he continued, "and her bed wasn't slept in. Her riding duds was gone, so I busted out to the stable. Her horse and saddle's gone, too, and her sorrel's tracks head straight towards the mountains. When I come back inside, I seen where she'd made up a pack of grub. And

my Winchester and a box of shells is missing!"

Ward felt physically sick. "So she's level-headed in a pinch!" he said. "So level-headed that she's sneaked off to help Weaver's necktie party find and string up Abcock!"

"Hold on!" objected Britt. "I talked with Nan after packing you upstairs, and she's willing to let the law deal with Abcock. She was raised back East, remember, where they believe in that way of doing



"Yes, this is Tex speaking . . ."

things. She promised me she wouldn't have nothing more to do with Weaver, and I don't believe she'd break her word!"

"Then you figure she's took out with some fool notion of bringing Abcock in herself—alone?"

"It's not such a fool notion. Abcock will probably be willing to come in, when he learns there's been a U.S. Marshal sent for and he'll get a square deal. Even if he ain't willing, I ain't worried about him harming Nan. He's got a motherless daughter of his own in a boarding school back East. The part I don't like is this: she's got to cross Double A range. Suppose some of Weaver's bunch spot her and guess where she's heading?"

Ward slid out of bed and began to dress. "They'll follow her, figuring to let her lead them to Abcock. But Weaver can't afford to let them get together, because when Abcock tells Nan the same story I said Kit told me, she'll know it's the truth. And her testimony as such would go a long way towards swaying a jury in Abcock's favor if he ever came to trial. Weaver will never let it get that far. He'll kill Nan first and lay that on Abcock, too, somehow. He's been itching to grab a chunk of Double A range. Getting rid of Abcock is his chance to take it all and he won't let anything stand in his way."

Sam Britt's face might have been molded of wet clay. "So that's his game!" he murmured shakenly. "Anybody'd oughta been able to see it!"

"Kit, having nothing to do with their trouble, provided a pretty good smoke screen," said Ward grimly. Buckling on his cartridge belt, he added, "Better make me up a pack of grub, Sam. And add plenty of forty-five and Winchester shells, both."

THE GIRL'S trail was not hard to follow. She was, he judged, about five hours ahead of him. Within a few miles the sage flat broke up into hills. Presently he saw Double A headquarters in a distant hollow. A pencil line of smoke rose from the ranch house chimney. There was no activity about the premises, nor did he see any sign of Walking W watchers waiting for Abcock to pay his home a stealthy visit. Instead of feeling reassured by this, his uneasiness deepened.

If Weaver and his bunch were not laying for Abcock here, where were they and what were they doing?

A few miles farther he found the answer exactly as he had feared. Three sets of horse tracks, coming from the direction of

Double A headquarters, cut into and overlapped the single set he was following. Nan was being trailed by three riders who were making no attempt to overtake her. They were, he judged, about an hour behind Nan. Four hours ahead of him.

By noon Ward had climbed into rough country. On each open point he halted to scan the mountain landscape. Forest covered many slopes now, with bare, rocky peaks jutting through the thick growth. Though he had gained steadily on his quarry, he caught no glimpse of them in the folds of broken terrain. When darkness forced him to make camp, he looked in vain for the glimmer of a distant campfire.

He was traveling again before the sun came up. By afternoon he was nearing Snake Canyon, and there, in an area all rock and bare cliffs, he lost the trail. He pressed on to the canyon rim and halted. Varying in depth from three hundred to five hundred feet, the chasm wound through the mountains for a distance of thirty miles. It was a toss-up which way Abcock had gone—which way Nan would figure he might have gone.

To Ward the down-canyon direction seemed the most logical, for it would take Abcock comparatively closer to the Double A, and hiding places for a fugitive were as good and numerous along the lower reaches of the canyon as the upper.

Ward turned down-canyon. He spent two days circling, trying to cut sign. Finally he followed along the canyon rim until he came to a familiar trail winding into its depths. The trail crossed a fifty-foot ledge, then rock gave way to an earthern slope, steep, but negotiable clear to the canyon floor far below.

A pulse of excitement began to beat in Ward's veins, when he found evidence that several horses had passed this way before him. He pressed downward, the roar of the river that had carved this gorge through a mountain range, growing steadily louder in his ears. He was on the canyon floor, following a narrow path over solid rock rising less than a foot above boiling white water, when the first rifle report caught his attention. Above the thunder of the stream, it sounded no louder than the cracking of a twig. He halted, tense, listening. Then the twig cracked again, and again. He nudged his mount on.

Within fifty feet the wall of the canyon dropped back abruptly. Here in a broad curve of the river lay acres of bottomland, at this season green with grass amid strewn boulders. Behind the first of these, less than twenty feet away, stood three saddled horses. Crouched behind a cluster of rocks nearby were two men. One, short and broad, Ward recognized as the Walking W puncher known as Pete. The other, tall and broad, was Pete's saddle pal, Patch. Using rifles, they were shooting at a cluster of rocks in the center of the open area, from which came a return fire. Midway between each position lay a dead horse—a sorrel.

WHAT HAD HAPPENED was plain. Weaver's party had sighted Nan and Abcock together and had opened fire, dropping Nan's mount. Despite this, man and girl had managed to reach cover. Weaver, having left his two henchmen to keep them pinned down, was undoubtedly working his way through the rocks along the base of the canyon wall with the intent of getting behind them.

The click of Ward's gunhammer was drowned out by the roar of the river, as had been the sounds of his approach. Not until he yelled were the pair aware of his presence. They spun about. The Winchester in the hands of Patch belched flame. Only his haste and lack of aim caused the slug to whiz harmlessly by. Ward shot him before he could squeeze trigger again. As he doubled up and fell, Pete froze in an awkward, bended-knee stance.

Lifting foot over saddlehorn, Ward slid to the ground and strode forward. "Drop that gun!" As Pete obeyed mechanically, he added, "Where's Weaver?"

But a fresh burst of rifle fire from the canyon wall made an answer unnecessary. Nan or Abcock had spotted Weaver among the rocks and he was replying to their attempt to halt his progress. There was no time to tie up a prisoner. Ward rapped the side of Pete's head with his gunbarrel.

Almost before the other's sagging body hit the ground, he was back in his saddle. Hanging behind his mount's neck, Indian fashion, he raced towards the defender's cluster of rocks.

He was shot at; he saw spurts of dirt kick up in front of him, and heard lead whiz by. Then he was spilling from his saddle behind rocks twice his height. A single saddle horse, ground-tied, snorted and sidled away, hoofs thudding. To the left Abcock lay on his back with closed eyes and a crimson patch at his left shoulder. Nan crouched beside him, rifle in hand. She fired once more, then turned.

"They started shooting when we were in the open," she said. "When my horse went down, Abcock could have made a run for it. But he stopped to take me up behind him. That's how he got shot."

A rifle bullet spanged off rock inches away, causing both to duck.

"Got to get Weaver before he gets behind us!" cried Ward. "Keep him busy while I make a run for the canyon wall!"

"But Ward!"

"Keep him busy!" he repeated.

In the saddle once more, he drove in spurs. A continuous crackle of gunfire behind revealed that Nan was carrying out his order. Weaver still found time to throw a little lead his way, yet he reached his objective unharmed. On foot, then, in a maze of boulders and rock abutments, it became a stalking game of shoot and duck, crawling from one position to another seeking an advantage.

The sun grew hot, while mouth and throat dried out. Ward lost track of time. There

Coming up in the next issue

WAGON TRAMP

Steve got involved in more than a range war when he met a spitfire who settled on his land—and in his heart

A Magazine-Length Novel

By FRANK C. ROBERTSON

DAUGHTER OF THE DESERT

Old Scout Oliver had to save his daughter—and the U.S. Army—from a sidewinder who wanted to betray them both

An Exciting Novelette

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

THE SILENT YEARS

Hatred stood between them—but the marriage had to be

A Western Short Story

By J. L. BOUMA

were periods when silence took on a droning quality. Nan had ceased firing long ago, unable to tell one from the other after all their scuttling about. Ward wasted no glance in the direction of her position. Every nerve must be strained in the effort to keep track of his opponent's movements. He guessed that the same absorption in their grim game governed Weaver, for the tiny rattle of even a single stone was enough to set off an echoing thunder of reports.

DURING a lengthy lull Ward wiped a trickle of sweat out of his eyes. Then he spied a movement in the area behind Weaver's latest position and his heart thudded. Was it Pete, returned to consciousness, moving in to reinforce his boss? Two enemies could easily maneuver him between them . . . But it was not Pete. It was Nan. Forgetting to breathe, Ward watched her slip from rock to rock, advancing upon his enemy's back.

Suddenly a rock turned under her weight, filling the air with a rattle of sliding gravel. Weaver's taut nerves caused him to whirl, half-rising, inadvertently exposing the upper half of his body. Ward saw Nan go down simultaneously as Weaver's gun barked. In a searing flash Ward fired also. Weaver stiffened, shot once into the ground, and then fell on his face. Ward leaped his body without a glance in his rush to the girl's side.

"Nan!"

She sat up. "I'm all right," she said, her pale lips trying to smile. "I fell when that rock turned under my foot—and the bullet missed me."

All the things Ward wanted to say crowded his throat and remained unuttered. Even explanations could wait. There was too much to do.

Neither Abcock nor Patch was fatally injured. Ward rigged up a travois for each. Weaver was dead. His body Ward loaded on one of the horses.

"That leaves us one short," he said to Pete. "Reckon you'll have to walk the whole fifty miles back to Britt's Post, unless you decide to tell the truth about that poker game and shooting."

Pete looked down at his tight-fitting riding boots. He looked at the body of the boss whose orders he had carried out—the man who had gambled ruthlessly and lost. He shrugged.

"Can't see any reason not to, now," he said. "Besides, maybe it'll go easier with Patch an' me if we come clean."

As he launched into his tale, Ward watched Nan's face. That white, frozen look he dreaded did not return. There was only a shadow of pain in her eyes when the puncher concluded.

"I already knew all that, Ward," she said quietly. "Abcock told me. I was taking him in—maybe to be hanged. Yet he passed up a chance to get away and almost got himself killed saving me. I had to believe then that his story—the same as yours—was true."

"Then can you also believe that I didn't hate Kit?" pleaded Ward. "He wasn't all bad—and he was my only brother."

"I believe you, Ward," she said. "Weaver's only interest was getting rid of Abcock. He tried to use Kit's shooting as a screen to cover up his ruthless scheming and greed. But Kit had that effect himself in life. It was hard for me to see or think clearly, when I was around him." She brushed at misty eyes and smiled valiantly. "I feel as though I'd just groped my way through a lot of smoke. My eyes are bound to smart and hurt for a while, but—"

Her gaze dropped. Mounting, she reached for the bridle reins of one of the travois-hitched horses. Soon the cavalcade was wending its way slowly homeward.

Bringing up the rear, Ward felt the weight that had burdened his heart for so long gradually lift. Nan had left her thought only half-expressed, but he knew what it was. In itself smoke had no enduring quality. It vanished into clear air and even its painful after-effects soon faded. For them both the memory of Kit would, in time, cease to hurt.

He knew that the waiting would prove worth-while.

A bankruptcy quandary and its solution

The West's Greatest Ride

By Walker A. Tompkins

CATTLE BUYER Louis Remme sat at breakfast in a Sacramento restaurant, ripping open the February 21, 1855, copy of the San Francisco *Daily Union* which had just been delivered by river boat. He was in a happy frame of mind, for behind him was a six-month trail drive with a herd which had netted him $12,500 in gold slugs. An hour ago he had deposited his money in the Sacramento office of the Adams Express Company.

Opening the newspaper, Remme was unaware that in thirty seconds he would be cast in the role of hero in one of the most dramatic sagas the West would ever witness. Remme soon heard the sounds of a mob forming outside the restaurant, in front of the express office. A moment later

he had the reason: Adams & Company had gone bankrupt—and Remme had just deposited his money with them.

In desperation, Remme headed for the express office. He found it blocked by an angry throng of depositors demanding their money back. But the sheriff had padlocked the doors, armed with a court order executed by the receivers. The fruits of his cattle drive were lost.

Remme's brain reeled. It would be useless to carry his draft inland to the Marysville or Hangtown offices; the news of the Adams insolvency would have closed them by now.

Suddenly an idea struck Louis Remme. Adams & Company had a branch office in Portland, Oregon, 700 miles to the north. In 1855 there was no stagecoach or pony express service to Portland from California, no railroad or telegraph. According to the Sacramento agent, the news of the company's failure would be carried to Portland by the ocean steamer *Columbia,* sailing through the Golden Gate that night.

Hurrying down to the river levee, taking only the clothes on his back and a Colt Dragoon .45—plus the precious bank draft signed only an hour ago by the Sacramento agent of Adams & Co.—Remme boarded a sternwheeler for Knight's Landing. At that point he borrowed a horse from a friend and began his long ride north, knowing he was racing an ocean-going vessel up the coast.

SUNSET of that historic February day found Remme swapping his second horse for a third, at a ranch near the Marysville Buttes. By ten o'clock he was galloping into Red Bluff, where he begged the use of another horse on the pretext that he was pursuing a horse thief and would be back shortly.

All night he skirted Mount Shasta's snowy landmark, looming against the winter stars like a white wigwam. The next day, snatching what sleep he could in the saddle, he borrowed, stole or purchased horses at every settlement or outlying homestead in his path. Remme did not know it, but he was holding his own with the *Columbia;* that ship had lost time discharging a company of soldiers at Humboldt, for the Indian campaign.

Threading the dim trails of the Siskiyous north of Yreka, Remme ran into an ambush of painted Modoc warriors, lusting for his scalp. He outran that hail of flint-barbed arrows by a sheer miracle; and another day found him at the mining camp of Jacksonville, where exhaustion forced him to take two hours' sleep.

On a fresh mount, he ferried the raging Rogue River and another day later, at the site of modern Roseburg, snatched another hour's sleep in the loft of a barn. The hostler who swapped horses with him told him he had 195 miles yet to go to reach Portland.

The weather was Remme's enemy, now that he had left hostile Indians behind. He lost the trail repeatedly in the downpouring "Oregon mist"; a blizzard was raging when he gained the Yoncolla Valley. There Jesse Applegate, one of Oregon's best-known early settlers, listened to his fantastic story and provided him with a fresh horse, the eighteenth since leaving Knight's Landing.

By daybreak Remme had outrun the elements and was safe in the log-cabined settlement of Eugene, in the lush Willamette Valley. The steamer *Columbia* had overtaken him during the night; it was even now heading into the broad inland river whose name it bore, a scant few hours' sailing time from Portland's docks.

At noon of his sixth day out of Sacramento City, a haggard Louis Remme crossed the winter-swollen Willamette at Milwaukie, sure that time lost during the storm had cost him his race.

One o'clock on a rain-drowned afternoon found him galloping his gaunted pony into the outskirts of Portland, where tall sailing ships lined the riverfront wharves—but no California steamer. Sliding from saddle, Remme put his question to a sailor coming out of a waterfront saloon: "The Frisco boat in yet?"

"Due in the stream now," the sailor answered. "Left the Astoria roadstead yesterday afternoon, I heard."

A walking scarecrow, gun-toting Louis Remme staggered into the Portland headquarters of the Adams Express Company and laid before Dr. Steinberger, the local agent, his draft for $12,500 drawn on the Sacramento office less than a week before.

"You don't want all this in specie?" Steinberger demanded, and Remme's heart plummeted. Had the skipper of the *Columbia* sent an overland courier down from Astoria ahead of his ship, to break the news of Adams's insolvency in Portland?

"I'm a cattle buyer," Remme explained. "I need the cash."

Five minutes later, after extracting a $62.50 service charge, Steinberger presented Remme with a canvas sack weighing forty pounds—Remme's entire deposit in $20 gold slugs.

As Remme was lurching out of the express office, he heard a steamer blow its landing whistle out on the river. The *Columbia* had lost its race by minutes. Within the quarter-hour the Portland office of the bankrupt express firm closed its doors forever, its depositors losing every penny of their funds.

All, that is, except California cattleman Louis Remme, who had made a trail ride without parallel in the annals of the West —covering 655 miles of rugged frontier country in only 133 hours.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. I heard a cowboy say his horse had a cold back. What did he mean?

2. True or false: all full-blood Hereford cattle have horns unless they have been dehorned by man.

3. Complete these two word names of famous Indian chiefs or medicine men: Sitting ———, Crazy ———, Gray ———, Roman ———.

4. In what Southwestern state did the late Ernie Pyle, famous war correspondent, make his home when not off reporting a war?

5. To designate the half-hitch of a rope around a saddlehorn, cowboys use several similar terms, all derived from a two-word Spanish expression. Give one of them, or the Spanish itself.

6. Cerán St. Vrain, Jim Bridger, Kit Carson and Lucien B. Maxwell were frontier trappers of and traders in the fur of what wild animal in particular?

7. What is the full name of the National Park in California that is named for a volcano?

8. I heard a rodeo cowboy say he bedded down his ox in eight. What did he mean?

9. One Western Las Vegas is famous for gambling, another for its cowboys' Reunion Rodeo. Identify each by naming the state it is in.

10. And while we are at it, what does "Las Vegas" mean?

——Rattlesnake Robert

You will find the answers to these questions on page 129. **Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.**

RANCH WAGER

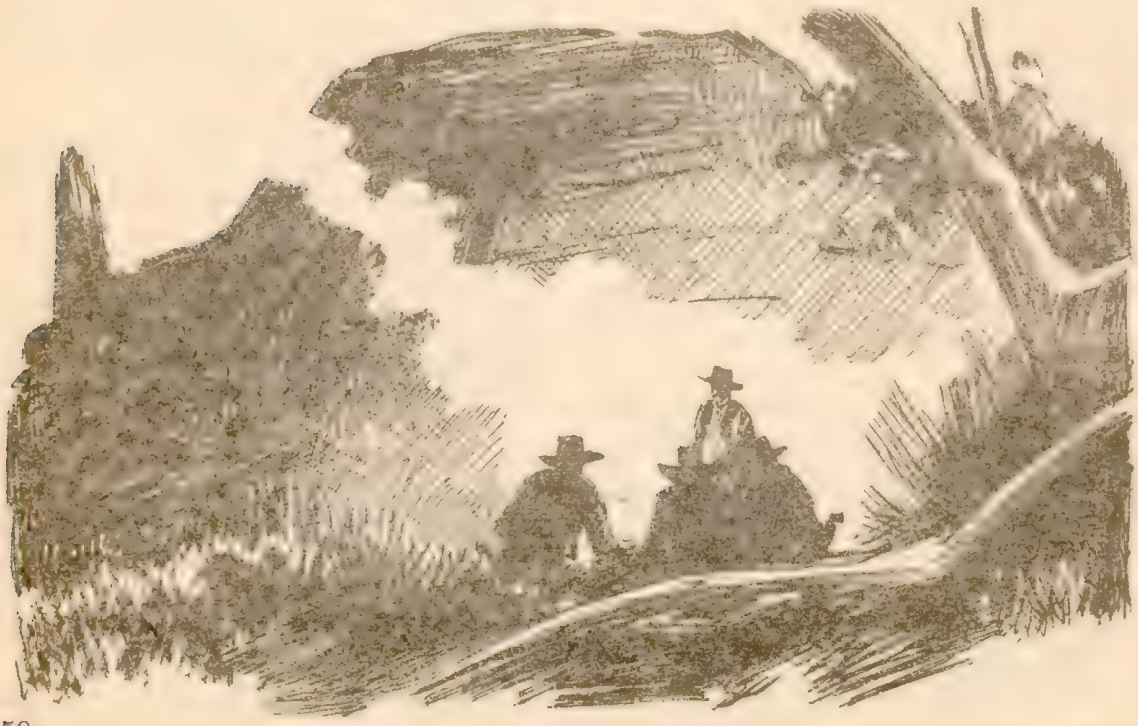
by FRANK C. ROBERTSON

ROMA POOLE ran down the path in the trim olive-green riding outfit her father had given her two weeks before on her twentieth birthday. She looked fresh as a young aspen tree, and lithe as a willow. Her father's eyes lighted with pleasure at the sight of her.

"Going with me, Dad?" she asked.

"Sorry, but I've got work to do. You give Semloh his workout, but no more than ten miles. Can't have him going stale now," Addison Poole said, and the trouble that had momentarily left his gray eyes returned.

"Semloh and I will get along," Roma laughed.



THE BURTON MEN were determined that they'd win

this race by fair means or foul—and preferably foul . . . .

As they walked toward the corral the head of a beautiful sorrel stallion was thrust over the top pole, and he greeted them with a friendly, eager whinny.

Roma stroked the stallion's head while her father brought out her saddle and bridle and put them on the horse. Semloh lowered his head and opened his mouth when Poole held out the bridle.

"He's eager," Roma laughed. "He'll win that race for us in a walk."

"Yes, I suppose so," Mr. Poole said. "The only thing that troubles me is why Clell Burton and his son even think they have a chance with that gray of theirs. To bet as much as they did—"

"It's just like you said, Dad. They don't know horses," Roma said. "You don't need to worry."

No, she thought, as she rode away, no need for him to worry—she could do enough of it for them both.

Addison Poole had been a Western rancher for fifteen years, but he had never been able to shed the traditions and ways of thinking of his Eastern up-bringing. But his daughter was a Westerner to her fingertips. She admired the sportsmanship, and high code of honor of her father, but she knew that it was expensive. Time and again Addison Poole had been tricked. Where other men's business showed a profit his capital had been slowly eaten away. And now, only a quivering, eager, beautiful thoroughbred stood between him and bankruptcy.

She would never know just how her father had been taunted into accepting Clell Burton's challenge to this double or nothing race that was to come off on the Salmon City race track in just three days, but it had been a challenge to his sportsmanship, and he came from a race that never took a dare—especially where a horserace was concerned.

THERE had never been any secrets between them, but he had delayed telling her about this as long as he could, and he hadn't been able to meet her clear eyes.

"But of course Semloh can beat that Burton gray," she had said.

"I know. I wouldn't have made the kind of bet I did if I hadn't been sure," he had told her diffidently.

"What kind of bet?"

"I've lost money pretty heavily the past five years, Roma, and this looks like a chance to get it back."

"Dad! How much?"

"I had to mortgage the ranch last fall to clear up my other debts. Clell Burton holds the mortgage. His proposition was that he would cancel the mortgage if I won. If I lose, well, I deed him the ranch."

"Oh, Dad! But what if something should happen?"

"Clell Burton is a gentleman. He won't pull any dirty stuff, if that's what you're thinking about. You see, dear, Burton is something of a range hog, and always was. He's wanted our range for a long time. Says he wants it now for his son Theo. And, by the way, he hinted that we wouldn't necessarily have to move even if we did lose; that is if you should happen to feel about Theo like he does about you."

"I despise Theo Burton," Roma flashed. "I always have."

"I know he was a pretty impossible kid, but he's just back from college now, and I must say he appears to be a gentleman."

"Dad, are you trying—"

He held up his hands, laughing. "Whoa! Not so fast. If you don't like Theo Burton that's the end of it. Besides, we're not going to lose that race. Ask Semloh."

No, Roma was thinking now, they wouldn't lose the race—if it was to be run honestly. Her father had argued that Burton was taking the chance because he wanted the ranch so badly, and this was his only chance to get it. But she didn't think the whole story had been told. Clell Burton, she was sure, had taunted her father into making the bet; had put it so that acceptance of the challenge had been a point of honor. Burton was a far wealthier man than Poole, and could afford to take the risk. But she hadn't blamed her father.

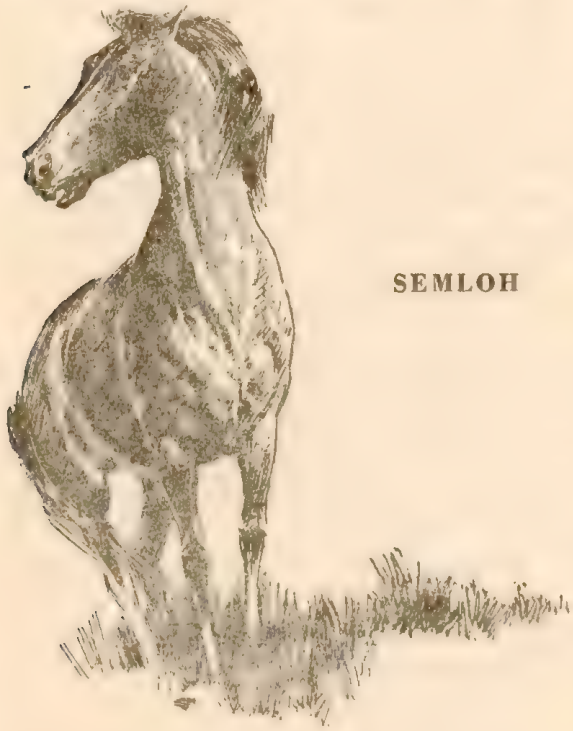
She had her hands full holding the beautiful sorrel stallion down to a proper speed, but she had been practically raised in the saddle, and understood horses.

She was perhaps two miles from the ranch when she heard a cry for help. She drew Semloh to a halt and listened. The cry seemed to come from a deep gravel pit below the road. It was repeated. A call of distress could not be ignored.

She wheeled Semloh off the road, and circled back through the timber until she could get down to the gravel pit. She saw a man lying in an awkward position on the gravel, having apparently fallen a distance of twenty feet. With a cry of pity Roma leaped to the ground and ran over to the man.

He was a stranger to her, a great, burly fellow with a red beard. Probably a sheep-herder, she thought.

"It's my arm," the man moaned. "Help me to straighten it out, will you, miss?"



SEMLOH

"Of course." Roma reached down to grasp the broken arm, and the next instant her wrist was seized in a grasp of steel, and she found herself looking into an evil, menacing face.

THE GIRL suppressed the scream that rose to her lips, and made a desperate effort to break loose. In the struggle she was jerked to her knees upon the gravel. It hurt excruciatingly, but it was several minutes before the cursing ruffian was able to subdue her to a point where she had to stand with each wrist gripped by powerful fingers, and her arms twisted painfully behind her.

"Regular hell-cat, ain't she, Smacker? Thought for a minute she was gonna claw your eyes out."

Roma saw another bearded, and only slightly less villainous person coming into the gravel pit.

"What do you mean by this outrage?" Roma demanded. "Let me go instantly!"

"Proud an' haughty, ain't you?" sneered her captor. "Expect everybody to jump when you give an order. This is one time you're taking orders instead of giving 'em."

The second man spoke up soothingly. "We ain't aiming to hurt you none, miss, but we like the looks of that stallion you're riding. We'll have to take you with us a little way, just so we won't have nobody on our heels too soon."

"You're working for Clell Burton," she charged.

"Burton? Who's he?" the man Smacker said mockingly. "Never heard of him."

She knew he was lying. Her father had said casually—too casually she realized now—that if either party defaulted he would lose the bet. It was this—not fear of being temporarily abducted—that drove terror to her heart.

They tied her hands behind her, and the second man, whom Smacker called Callahan, held Semloh while Smacker boosted her into the saddle. The men were well mounted, and they lost no time getting away. They were strangers to her, but their actions indicated that they knew the country.

Hours later they stopped at an abandoned prospector's cabin, where they had several pack horses staked.

They untied Roma's hands, and with a warning to her not to try to leave, hastened to pack up their belongings. They had cold meat and flap-jacks which they stuffed into their mouths as they worked. They offered some to Roma, but she refused it icily.

They denied all knowledge of Clell Bur-

ton, but Roma still believed that Burton was at the bottom of it, although she couldn't be sure. By this time her father would begin to worry about her, but she had always been able to take care of herself so he wouldn't worry seriously until she failed to return by nightfall. The search for her couldn't begin before the next morning, and it might be several days before they would discover this cabin.

ROMA'S sense of physical danger diminished when an argument broke out between the two men concerning her. There was a shaggy-haired old buckskin pony among the packhorses which Callahan wanted to leave for her to ride home on. Smacker insisted that she should be made to walk.

"Old Moose ain't worth five dollars to nobody," Callahan argued, "and slow as he is she couldn't get home till long after dark. By that time we'll be in the clear anyway. The old pelter will only slow us down if we take him along."

Roma listened eagerly. The old buckskin was about the ugliest animal she had ever seen, and he was admittedly slow.

She kept hoping the men would drop some hint as to their plans, but they didn't. All she knew was that they were taking Semloh into those mountain fastnesses where it would be impossible to recover him, and that her father would be ruined when he failed to appear for the big race in Salmon.

Before they left, Smacker, in what looked like childish love of mischief, but which had a deeper purpose, tied her stirrups together on top of the saddle with a series of intricate knots, then tied cinch and latigo in as many knots as he could make.

"I guess that'll keep you busy for a while, baby," he jeered as they rode away.

Tears stood in Roma's eyes as she looked at the disreputable pony, and the knots in her saddle. She was almost tempted to turn the pony loose and start home on foot. But it was at least twenty miles home, over rough country, and her high-heeled boots were not built for walking.

Her fingers were strong, and she got to work untying the knots. She found a sharp stick with a charred point in the cabin, and by its use succeeded in untying all the knots much faster than Smacker had anticipated. The old buckskin nickered impatiently while she worked.

She stepped into the saddle, and without waiting to be guided the old buckskin started out the way the other horses had gone. A sudden flash of hope surged through Roma's brain. In trying to overtake the other animals, old Moose might not be so slow. If she could follow the outlaws she might be able to steal Semloh away from them!

It was worth trying. She let the pony have his head, and was instantly surprised by the speed he showed. He had intelligence, too, for he kept dropping his head to the earth to sniff at the fresh tracks like a dog.

Her enthusiasm was cooled by the knowledge that the two ruffians were going to be pretty impatient if they discovered that she was following them. Smacker wouldn't hesitate to murder her, if he deemed it necessary to protect himself. This was grave, dangerous business she was on, but on the other hand her father's whole future might be at stake.

They had followed a dim mountain trail for perhaps two hours when old Moose raised his head and started to whinny. Roma gave the bridle a jerk and checked the whinny. She patted the pony's sweaty neck by way of apology.

She knew that the outlaws must be only a short distance ahead. Her problem was to remain out of sight until dark, without losing the trail; then slip in and steal Semloh.

She held the buckskin down to a walk, and soon they came to a clear, cold creek. Moose dropped his head and drank noisily. But when he splashed on across to the other side he seemed bewildered, and there was not a track to be seen. The outlaws had ridden either up or down the creek as an added precaution if by any accident they should be tracked this far.

Roma choked back a sob. This was all strange country to her. The mountains rose

to dizzy heights from the canyon she was in, and already it lay shadowed in the gloom of approaching darkness. She didn't know which way to go, and she had no assurance that she wouldn't get lost if she tried to go back.

SHE STILL had found no sign of the outlaws when darkness settled down. She had spent many a night in the open, a few of them alone, so she was not filled with panic, only a great uneasiness. She knew that the folks at home would be as worried as she was. She had no matches, so she could only sit down on the creek bank, and hold the end of her lasso rope while Moose grazed at the other end.

Suddenly Moose threw up his head and whinnied. A cold chill struck Roma's bosom. Only another horse could have inspired that nicker. She heard the horse moving, then a voice called out questioningly, "Hello there."

It was neither Smacker nor Callahan! Roma called eagerly, "Hello!"

The man rode close. In the darkness she couldn't tell what he looked like, but he rode a good horse. "You're a woman," he said, "and you're alone?" He sounded incredulous.

"I'm lost," Roma said.

He swung down, and although she was a tall girl he towered above her. She felt comfort in his mere presence. "What happened?" he asked.

She decided to tell him everything—whether he believed her or not. Apparently he did.

"You showed a lot of nerve, Miss—"

"I'm Roma Poole."

"I'm Dewey Roberts. I've met your father. Asked him for a job once, but he turned me down, so I had to go to work for Clell Burton."

Roma's heart sank. She had just told him she suspected Clell Burton of being behind the theft, and he was one of Burton's employees!

"This is Burton's range?" she asked weakly.

"Part of it. Me and a couple of the other boys are camped about five miles from here doing some riding. I was late getting to camp."

"Would those men—be there?" she faltered.

"Not likely." He became silent. She could see him frown. "If they should be Burton's men," he went on thoughtfully, "it's possible I know where they are. But I'm sure you're wrong about Burton."

"And if not?" she demanded.

"If you could prove it, I'd do what I could to get your horse back," he said simply.

He went on, as if talking to himself. "The place I meant is a sort of park where Burton and his son sometimes camp when they come into the mountains to hunt or fish. But I ain't seen either of 'em for three weeks."

Roma climbed into the saddle, and old Moose followed close behind the cowboy's horse. This was Burton's man, yet she was following him as meekly as if she were a lamb. For all she knew, she thought, he might be in with Smacker and Callahan.

Dewey stopped abruptly, and pointed through the trees. "A fire," he said. "They're there!"

"I hope Clell Burton and Theo are there, too," she said.

"Ain't two horsethieves enough to deal with?" he asked dryly.

"The outlaws wouldn't give Semloh back, but the Burtons wouldn't dare refuse."

"You think so?" His tone was doubtful.

THEY LEFT their horses and moved closer on foot. They could see five men by the fire. Roma recognized the huge, pot-bellied figure of her father's enemy, Clell Burton, and across from him sat Smacker. The others she couldn't identify as yet.

"Well, sink my saddle blanket in a boghole if I ain't working for a horsethief," Dewey said softly.

"You keep out of this," Roma said sharply. "I'm going in there and tell Clell Burton what I think of him, and get Semloh."

Before he could protest she was walking

across the open grass. She was too angry to be afraid, now that she had proof of Burton's crookedness. She could hear Burton's booming laughter and the sound infuriated her.

She had no fear of personal injury. Clell Burton was too big a man in the country to resort to violence against her. She didn't take time to think the matter out, or she might have realized that Burton couldn't afford to have his crookedness exposed either.

She stepped suddenly out of the darkness, and said sardonically, "Good evening, gentlemen."

Four of the five men were stricken speechless, but the fifth, Theo Burton, leaped to his feet. He was powerfully built, and not bad-looking. "Why, Roma!" he exclaimed. "This is a surprise."

"I'll bet it is," the girl agreed grimly.

The eyes of Smacker roamed to Clell Burton's face, while his hand dropped to the handle of his gun. Roma saw it. One nod from Burton, and she would be dead. But she didn't believe yet that Burton would give that nod.

"Why, bless my soul, it's Roma!" Clell exclaimed suddenly. "What are you doing away out here?"

"I came for my Semloh horse, Mr. Burton, that you paid these two men to steal."

"I don't know what you're talking about. You mean that bog-spavined stallion you folks think is a racehorse?" His attempt to be awkwardly funny was a cover-up.

"Don't try to put me off, Mr. Burton," she said. "Those two men forced me to come with them for twenty miles, and I followed them the rest of the way."

Clell looked at the two ruffians in a way that made them squirm. Smacker said defensively, "It was that damn buckskin Callahan insisted we leave for her—"

"Shut up!" Clell roared. He stepped forward and towered menacingly over Roma. "It's a mighty foolish thing for a girl like you to be roaming around these hills alone at night. If you had happened to bump into one of my cowpokes— We'll fix you up with supper and a bed, but forget this nonsense about a horse."

Cold fear was stealing over her, but she said defiantly, "Perhaps you don't realize that I can send you to the penitentiary along with these men of yours. Give Semloh back to me and I'll guarantee that my father will let the matter drop. If he ever finds out how I was manhandled by these hired ruffians of yours he'll kill you."

BURTON turned now to the fifth man in the party, a small, bandy-legged cowpoke named Huie Herring of whom Roma knew a lot, and little of it good. He was the jockey who would ride Burton's gray in the race against Semloh —if the race ever came off.

"Stroll out and see if that heavy-footed stud of Poole's is around, Huie," Burton said.

Huie jumped to his feet.

"Oh, no you don't," Roma cried out, realizing that Huie simply would move Semloh elsewhere. "I'll do the looking, if you please."

As she turned Clell Burton seized her arm and jerked her roughly back. Huie Herring disappeared in the darkness as she slapped the cowman in the face. He let go for an instant, and she started to run. Before she could take two steps Theo caught her.

"Now, Roma, you don't want to get excited," he said. "Your horse isn't around here, but if your father wants to call off the race I think we could fix everything—"

"You're as contemptible as your father."

Young Burton flushed angrily. "You always were a hell-cat," he rasped. Before he could say more his father was thundering, "I'll tell you this, Miss High-and-mighty: I'll break your old man like I would a twig. I've put up with his fine airs as many years as I'm going to, and when we get through with you, you won't have reputation enough left to hang a rag on. That'll bring Addison Poole to his milk, I think." He seized her wrist and literally jerked her out of his son's grasp and then, as if he were cracking a whip, sent her spinning toward a pile of blankets. Unable to save herself, she fell upon them.

"Stay there!" Burton roared.

"And you all stay right where you are," came Dewey Roberts's voice from the fringe of darkness. "I'll shoot the first man makes a bad move."

Roma had all but forgotten the puncher who had brought her there. She hadn't thought he would be foolish enough to tackle so many, no matter how indignant he might become. But his voice had a steely quality in it that made the four men slowly raise their hands. They were guessing whether there was one man, or more.

"Take their guns, Miss Poole," Dewey said steadily, and Roma obeyed the order with speed and enthusiasm. She tossed the weapons in a pile, except for a sixgun.

"I've got them covered," she said. "See if you can find Huie Herring before he gets away with Semloh."

"Don't worry about him," Dewey replied. "When he comes to he'll find himself tied to a tree."

"What do you mean butting in here?" Burton bellowed. "You're working for me."

"I *was* working for you. What'll we do with 'em, Miss Poole?"

"Can we tie them up?" she asked. "Smacker and Callahan will tell the truth about who hired them if they know what's good for them."

Dewey ordered Callahan to tie up his partner. "When you get through with him you can start on the Burtons," he said.

"You can't do this to me," Burton roared. "I've got too much influence—"

"Try and use it."

With a disdainful grunt Theo stared out into the darkness. Roma kept an eye on him, while Dewey supervised the tying of Smacker.

Dewey finally threatened, "See here, you, if you don't stop twisting about I'll comb you to sleep with the barrel of this—"

He had half raised the gun as Theo Burton suddenly whirled for a flying tackle. Theo had been a football player, and he came with the velocity of a mad bull. The top of his head smashed into Dewey's stomach with two hundred pounds behind it before Dewey could use his gun. Dewey went down with the wind all knocked out of him, and the gun flew out of his hand.

Roma had started a cry of warning when Theo started, but it was too late. She tried to turn her guns on Theo but the flat of Clell's hand knocked her down within reach of the two outlaws. Callahan twisted the gun from her hand.

ROMA AND DEWEY looked at each other helplessly. Their hands were tied securely behind their backs and anchored to two small trees. Burton was weighing their lives against his own liberty and reputation. Rather than have the truth be known he would willingly have them murdered—but murder was a dangerous business, and he was trying to think of another way.

Although Dewey asked them to give Roma something to eat, they refused. She was too proud to admit it, but she was hungry. She could see trout and bacon in a frying pan, and the odor of coffee still issued from a half-filled pot. It made her mouth water, but she wouldn't beg.

Apparently Clell couldn't make up his mind easily, for presently he rolled into his blankets. Roma was given a blanket to sit upon, and another to cover her, but she was not untied. At last, against her will, she fell asleep.

It was broad day when she awakened. She looked at the Burtons and knew that they had finally made up their minds. The four men calmly ate breakfast without offering the prisoners anything. Roma thought she had never been so hungry in her life. After they had eaten she was untied. They offered no objection when she walked stiffly down to the creek to wash her face and hands in cold water.

Theo met her as she was coming back, and with a hand on her elbow walked her beyond earshot of the others.

"This can be a serious matter, Roma, if you make it so," he warned. "But if you're a good sport you'll just admit that you and your father were outsmarted and let it go at that."

"You mean let my father be ruined!"

"He never had a chance. Those gentlemanly ways of his are no good out here, and

never were. Sure, Smacker and Callahan swiped your horse, but you can't prove my father had anything to do with it, and you'll never see them again. But you don't really need to lose a thing."

"What do you mean?"

"You know I was always stuck on you, Roma, even though you did turn up your cute little nose at me when we were kids. Marry me, and your father can live with us on his little old ranch as long as he lives. You'll come to like me."

"Let's get this one thing straight," Roma said coldly. "We Pooles never welshed on a bet in our lives. We can lose if we have to, but we don't take charity. And both of us would rather starve than have anything to do with any Brutons. I despise you as much as I do your father."

Theo's face crimsoned. "I lowered myself to give you the chance," he said. "The only reason I'd marry you at all would be for the fun of breaking you of your damned superior ways. Now you can just take what's coming to you."

Roma was probably more frightened right then than she had ever been, but she walked calmly toward the camp. She was more than ever amazed when the four men saddled up and rode away, leaving her and Dewey at the camp. Hue Herring had already disappeared.

"They've gone!" she gasped. "I can't understand it."

"Neither can I," Dewey replied. "I sure figured to get bumped off, after I made a mess of things last night."

"That wasn't your fault. You—you were fine," she declared fervently.

The only knife she could find at camp was a dull case-knife, and she couldn't cut the thongs on his swollen wrists and ankles with it.

"There's the ax," he said. "Hold the blade straight up, and I'll saw down on it."

IN A FEW MINUTES he was free. There were still some uncooked trout that had been caught the evening before. Roma stirred up the fire and began cooking breakfast while he washed up and looked around for horses.

"Well, we're afoot," he reported when he came back. "I—I'm sorry but I suppose this will look bad for you when they—they report that we were up here together. If there's anything I can do—"

He was blushing like a schoolboy. Slowly Roma comprehended what he meant. "I see," she said quietly. "If I tell the truth about what's happened the Burtons will give out a story about us being up here alone. If they tell such a story my father will try to kill Clell Burton—and he'll get himself killed. They plan on that keeping our mouths shout. Fear of a scandal."

"Don't hesitate on my account. You're the only one concerned."

"I guess there's nothing we can do," she admitted. "It's only my father I'm thinking of. I just don't want him gunning for the Burtons. If I hadn't been so sure of myself last night we might have found Semloh and got away without them knowing we were around."

"Wrong. The horse was hidden. Not much chance of us finding him."

The meal was ready, and Roma ate with enjoyment. Dewey, too, ate with relish, but his eyes were on the girl most of the time. Several times he was on the verge of saying something, but waited for her to satisfy her appetite.

"I'm afraid I made a bit of a pig of myself," she smiled ruefully as she leaned back and surveyed the pile of fish bones. "But I was hungry."

"I like to watch you eat," he said. "I'm just beginning to appreciate how brave you are."

"You weren't exactly cowardly yourself when you stuck up those men last night," she replied. "And I am sorry about your losing your job."

"I can get another one," he said shortly. "I was going to try something this morning, but now I think maybe I'd better let you in on it."

"What's that?"

"It's only a guess, and you shouldn't get your hopes built up on it. But I happened to overhear a few words, and catch a few signs that passed between Smacker and Callahan. They're real outlaws, not ama-

"Are you badly hurt?" Roma cried

teurs like the Burtons. Burton hired 'em, and is fool enough to think they'll be satisfied with their pay."

Roma's eyes grew brighter. "What are you thinking?" she demanded.

"If they happen to know where Huie Herring was taking that stallion of yours I think they'll follow him and steal the horse for themselves."

"Have you any idea where Huie went?" she asked eagerly, and her face fell when he answered, "Not an idea in the world. But if we had a couple of horses—"

"What?"

"I believe they'll pull out of the country fast, and the shortest way to the safest country for them is through Council Pass. If we could head 'em off—" He stopped abruptly as two horsemen rode into view.

"Burton's punchers," Roma breathed. "Lee Pritchard and Harry Otis."

"I know," Dewey stated. "I've been riding with 'em. They're a pair of skunks, and I won't mind leaving 'em on foot."

"Be careful," Roma warned hastily, "they've got guns."

THE TWO PUNCHERS were grinning widely as they rode up. "So this is the love nest we've been hearing about," Pritchard chuckled. "Sure looks like you can't have any privacy anywhere, doesn't it?"

The smirk on the fellow's face infuriated Dewey. He started forward, but Roma seized his arm. This was part of Clell Burton's plan to blast her reputation if she tried to make trouble. It was a cold, unpleasant fact, and there was no use to get excited about it.

She smiled up at the men. "We've just had breakfast, but there is still some coffee. Won't you have some?"

They looked uncertain. It wasn't often they had a chance to look at a pretty girl, and Pritchard answered, "Well, seeing it's you, Miss Poole, don't care if I do."

She motioned them over to the fire; and Dewey stood aside sulkily. "Oh, dear," she said, "there isn't as much coffee as I thought, but I'll make some fresh. Won't you sit down?"

They laughed and seated themselves on a log. They knew Dewey was unarmed, and they were enjoying the situation.

"You don't need to worry about us, Miss Poole," Pritchard said. "About us talking, I mean. You just keep still, and we will. Nobody gets hurt that way."

"That's kind of you, I'm sure," Roma said, "but as a matter of fact I haven't the slightest idea what you are talking about. If you want to talk it's perfectly all right with me."

They were puzzled. Pritchard said, "But you spending the night up here alone with Dewey Roberts—"

"Wouldn't I have been just as safe if I'd spent the night with you?"

"Why, yes, but—but—" The fellow was at a loss for words. Deliberately Roma had moved over to shake the grounds out of the coffee pot so that if they watched her they would have to turn their backs on Dewey. They chose to watch her.

But it was a tense moment. They were both armed, but Pritchard had a carbine in a scabbard on his saddle which he had apparently forgotten. Roma talked on as she watched Dewey back slowly toward the ground-reined horses. Then, as he whirled to jerk the weapon from the scabbard, she pretended to get burned, and dropped the coffee pot with a little cry. Watching her, they didn't see Dewey until he had the rifle.

"Better make your own coffee, boys," he said then. "Miss Poole and I are in a hurry. But first just unbuckle those gunbelts and let 'em drop."

Their jaws dropped as they saw the rifle in Dewey's hands. Pritchard cursed, but they dropped their sixguns, and Roma retrieved them.

"Now, by thunder, we will have plenty to say," Pritchard threatened. "If you want a scandal—"

"Shut up," Dewey ordered. "Come on, Miss Poole, we'd better travel."

He took one gun, while Roma belted the other around her slim waist. Then they mounted the cowhands' horses, and rode away.

"You handled that beautifully," he congratulated her.

"But you took all the risk," she returned warmly.

"Look," he said, "why don't you hustle home? Your father will be terribly worried. If I can get that horse—"

"I'm going with you," she said. "It's the least I can do. As for the scandal, I'm ready to face it for the chance to get back at Clell and Theo Burton."

Dewey felt as if he had known her for years, but she was different from any girl he had ever known. They were partners in a dangerous enterprise, and he would be the innocent cause of her name being bandied about in the saloons and respectable houses of Salmon City if they were unsuccessful. He realized suddenly that he was in love with her, but he could never ask her to marry him; not only because he was a penniless, jobless cowpuncher, but because marriage, even if she should consent, would make it look as if the lies the Burtons would tell were true.

Suddenly Roma looked over at him and smiled. "I know what you're thinking," she said.

"You do?" He felt himself blushing.

"You're thinking that you ought to do the honorable thing and ask me to marry you. It isn't necessary, Dewey. I can face anything that I have to face."

A COUPLE OF HOURS' riding brought them to a narrow place in Council Pass. They dismounted, hid their horses, and looked for tracks. There were no fresh ones. They waited for hours while Dewey worried about the girl having to pass another night with him.

Roma had much more to worry about. If Dewey had guessed wrong, her father would be ruined and her own name dragged in the mud. And she still had time to worry over Dewey's getting in bad with the Burtons. He was a nice boy, she thought; one of the nicest she had ever known. He would do to ride the river with. Having taken up her cause he would stick to the finish, even if that finish involved offering to marry her if they got out alive. And so she had told him that that sacrifice would not be accepted.

The hours dragged on until the sun wasn't an hour high. Suddenly, Dewey said, "I saw something moving through the pines. If it's our men they'll be in sight right away."

Almost before he ceased speaking a horseman came into sight. It was Smacker, and he was leading two packhorses.

Fifty yards behind came Callahan, leading Semloh. Old Smoke, the little buckskin, followed along behind like a dog, with a light pack on his back.

"Oh, they've got Semloh!" Roma breathed excitedly.

They fully sensed the danger of their undertaking. These men were desperate characters who wouldn't hesitate to kill. They were in urgent haste, for they were riding hard to get through the pass before night overtook them.

Dewey started down the slope rapidly from their lookout station, and she hurried along behind as fast as she could. Once she slipped and hurt her knee on a sharp stone, but she made no sound, and was up without his knowing she had fallen. They had chosen a spot behind a recently fallen pine tree for their ambush. A great mass of dirt and rocks still clung to the roots so that they could stand straight without being seen over the top.

The distance between the outlaws had increased to a hundred yards, and at the last moment Dewey holstered the sixgun and picked up the rifle. "You keep down," he admonished.

Twenty feet below where they waited Smacker stopped suddenly and called out, "Why don't you hurry up?"

"Hell, I didn't murder nobody," Callahan responded. "If you feel yourself stranglin' go ahead. I'll catch up."

"Well, don't yell," Smacker cried fearfully. "And don't think you'll crawl out of anything if they ever try to hang me."

Roma and Dewey glanced at each other with horror in their eyes. Undoubtedly Smacker had killed Huie Herring to get Semloh away from him.

Smacker grunted and spurred his horse viciously. As the horse leaped ahead Dewey stepped out.

"Don't move," he warned, "I've got you covered."

SMACKER jerked his horse to a stop, but then his hand struck at his gun. Callahan, taking in the situation seventy-five yards away, wheeled his mount recklessly back down the trail, and the well trained Semloh responded to the lead-rope.

If Callahan got away now they couldn't recover the stallion! Dewey had no time to make up his mind. Ignoring Smacker, he drew a swift bead on Callahan and fired, but at almost the same instant Smacker fired, too, and the shot tore painfully through the muscles beneath Dewey's right arm.

Dewey swayed dizzily, for a moment utterly unable to handle the rifle. He saw Callahan falling from the saddle, but there was a wicked, triumphant look on Smacker's face as the man rose in the stirrups for a second shot.

Dewey would have died then had not Roma fired from just above him. She held the heavy sixgun in both hands, and she was trembling too violently to take good aim, but she didn't miss. The bullet barely grazed Smacker's elbow, but it caused him to jerk his arm and miss Dewey.

Suddenly, then, Dewey conquered the pain. He swung the rifle barrel around while Smacker was trying to control his horse and get in another shot, and the ball tore through the outlaw's body. Smacker plunged headlong to the ground.

White-lipped, Dewey said, "Well, looks like we stopped 'em."

"Oh, Dewey dear, are you badly hurt?" Roma cried out. Her eyes, now widened with horror, were fixed upon the spreading patch of crimson on his shirt. She didn't know that her words had magical effect upon him—made him deliriously happy.

"I'm all right, Roma," he said. "But you'd better get your Semloh horse before he gets away again."

He followed her slowly. Callahan looked up at them with pain in his eyes when they neared him, but he was through fighting.

"So you murdered Huie Herring!" Dewey charged.

"I didn't, but I suppose I'll hang for it—if I don't die from this shot," Callahan said. "Smacker was a fool."

"Fortunately for you we heard Smacker admit that he did the killing. We'll do the best we can for you—providing you tell the truth."

"I've got nothing to lose," Callahan said grimly. "Get me out alive and I'll swear Burton and his son hired us to steal your horse, and everything."

As Roma was petting Semloh the little buckskin came up to her, and she patted his neck. "I love you both," she said softly. Then she looked at Dewey Roberts and her eyes were luminous. "Would you mind if I said I love you, too?" she asked.

"Like you do the horses?"

"Of course not," she said. "You still don't have to ask me to marry you to save my good name. There won't be any scandal now. But I hope you'll ask my father again for a job."

"You think I'd make him a good son-in-law?" he asked.

"He can take the gamble if I can," she said softly, and he kissed her.

It was a big moment, but they couldn't make it last. They had to get back to Salmon City quickly, and Dewey had a wound which had to be taken care of.

They tore up Smacker's shirt to make bandages for Callahan, and got the man back into the saddle.

They had to travel slowly, but they reached Salmon City at nine o'clock the following morning. It was the day of the race, set for ten o'clock—not an hour hence.

They rode straight to the sheriff's office and delivered their prisoner.

Roma did the talking. "This is the partner of the man who murdered Huie Herring," she said. "You'll find the body of the other man back in Council Pass. Clell Burton hired these men to kidnap me and steal our Semloh horse. These men double-crossed him and killed Herring to steal Semloh. We intercepted them."

The sheriff looked incredulous. "You mean Clell Burton done a dirty trick like that? I knew there was to be a race this morning, and he's been saying he'd bet a

thousand dollars your father wouldn't show up."

"My father isn't in town then?"

"Look, ain't that Mr. Poole now?"

ROMA then saw her father riding across a bridge just below the courthouse. He saw her at the same time, and galloped to meet her.

"My God, Roma, where have you been?" he demanded. "I've been half crazy. I was afraid you'd lost Semloh—"

"That would have been bad, wouldn't it," she said. "Of course if it had just been me—"

"I didn't mean that. It's just that this race coming up means so much, and I knew something had happened to you. I almost suspected Clell Burton— Say, isn't that man there hurt?"

"Badly hurt," she answered. "Come on, there's something I think you'll have to hear."

Addison Poole's face grew whiter as he listened to his daughter's story. "I'll kill Clell Burton for this," he breathed.

"I wouldn't," the sheriff said. "Suppose we get this fellow inside and send for a doctor. Then I'll go with you to talk to Burton."

"Dewey's wound must be dressed, too, before we can do anything," Roma declared.

"By the way, young fellow," the sheriff said. "Burton said he suspected *you* of murdering Huie Herring, when he told me Huie was dead. Now it looks to me like old Clell Burton himself might be a dead pigeon."

It was almost time for the race when Roma, her father, Sheriff Wayne, and Dewey Roberts rode out to the racetrack. Addison Poole was now mounted on Semloh.

A big crowd had gathered, and they were out on the track before Clell and Theo Burton saw them.

It was not the sight of Roma or her father that struck fear to their hearts, but that of the sorrel stallion; they knew they had lost their biggest gamble. Theo would have slipped away in the crowd if his father hadn't stopped him. They came slowly forward.

"Well, Poole," Burton said, "it looks like my little joke might have backfired. If you want to call off all bets I'm willing."

"My horse will be there, ready to run," Poole said coldly.

"Got to tell you, Burton," the sheriff said, "that the man who murdered Huie Herring is dead, but his partner is in jail, and he's made a full confession. Mr. Poole and his daughter have asked me not to arrest you and your son until after the race. But don't try to get away."

"Can't we settle this some way?" Burton begged abjectly.

"We'll talk about that after the race," Poole said.

Burton broke into a cold sweat, and Theo looked ready to faint. "The race is yours, by default," Clell said. "I'll cancel the mortgage immediately."

"I can't compel you to run your horse, but I can see that you don't tell any lies about my daughter," Poole grated out savagely.

"Nothing out of the way happened," Burton said hastily. "I have the greatest respect for Miss Poole—so has my son."

"What about it, Mr. Poole?" the sheriff asked. "You've got your horse back, and apparently Burton had nothing to do directly with Herring's murder, but you've got a good case if you want him arrested."

Addison Poole looked at his daughter. "What about it, Roma?" he queried.

"Let it drop," she said without hesitation. "I'm happy."

Addison Poole rode Semloh slowly around the track to win the race officially. When it was over the Burtons had gone.

Poole rejoined Roma and Dewey Roberts. He said, "Young man, haven't I seen you before?"

"I asked you for a job once."

"Well," Mr. Poole grinned, "I'd put you on now, but I've an idea I'm too late."

"You can always use a son-in-law," Roma told him, and laughed.

She'd wanted his kiss, but he was only making fun of her

Rueful Rustler

By Jeanne Williams

KRIS TARRANT sat on the bench by the wood box and paid strict attention to the boots she was saddle-soaping. She knew by the way Gramps kept fidgeting he was worked up about something, but maybe if she kept quiet he'd settled down to his newspaper.

THE MAN his girl loved was outside the law— and Orin was determined to keep him there

"Why don't you get married?" Gramps fussed, scuttling her hopes. "We need a man around here! What with some coyote using a running iron on the cattle, it's not safe for you to be out trying to take care of things. Now a man like—"

"Like Orin Cartrell?" Kris wrinkled her nose and shook her head. "No, thanks. I'd just as soon get shot riding fence as to marry some man in order to get a free hired hand."

Scowling at her through steel-rimmed spectacles, Gramps snorted: "You're forgetting, ain't you, that he's got his own ranch? Done pretty well with it, too, con-

sidering he only got started a couple of years ago. He'd scare the daylights out of whoever's been messing around stealing cattle!"

"Sure!" said Kris. "He's really been a success with that vigilance committee he organized. All they do is whoop and holler and talk about what they'll do to the rustlers!" Gramps cracked his cane down sharply on the floor.

"They'll do more'n talk when they finally get a lead! If I didn't have this dang rheumatism, you can bet I'd join 'em—fast!"

He glared. Kris shrugged and rubbed more soap on a small scuffed boot. All the ranchers had been losing cattle, but the last six months it'd gotten worse. Most of the cattlemen had joined Orin Cartrell's organization, and Orin himself got them all to agree not to use running irons. Any cowboy caught now with one of the plain, poker-like irons would do his explaining with a rope around his neck, if he got that much of a chance. Pushing it out of her mind, Kris glanced up. Gramp's gray whiskers bristled as if he didn't want to say what he had to.

"We're having company for supper tomorrow, Kris."

"Who?"

Gramps pulled off his specs, polished at them. "Orin." That was all he said, but it was too much.

"No!" Kris jumped up, dropping the boot. "Gramps, he isn't?" The old man crossed his arms and nodded his head.

"He is so! I saw him at the sale yesterday and asked him. And you better treat him nice!"

Clenching her hands, Kris burned as a deep wave of humiliation welled up in her. "I bet you told him we—we need some help! I—I bet you talked around and said I ought to be married!"

"You ought!" Gramps snapped unrepentantly. Kris drew a long breath.

"Well, I sure hope you'll enjoy looking across the biscuits at Orin's curly hair—because I'm not going to be here!" She grabbed up her boots and swung toward the door of her room.

"Hold on!" Gramps roared. "I told Orin you'd be here!"

"Then you told him a darn sight too much. After that, it shouldn't stretch your imagination to think up a reason for me being gone. Tell him the truth for all I care! He's yours!"

She pushed out the door with her chin in the air and Gramp's rumbling growl plaintive in her ears. If they lost every cow they owned, if she got shot by rustlers, if she grew into a dour old maid, she still wasn't going to be stampeded into some man's arms! Even if she'd liked that hungry, arrogant way Orin had of watching her as if he already owned her, the way he owned his cattle and ranch, the way he'd own any woman he married.

Not me, Kris thought and tightened her lips.

THAT was why, next evening, Kris sat out on a hill and stared down at the light in the valley. She'd softened enough toward Gramps to fry one of her chickens, mash potatoes, and set the table. But the minute she'd tucked the biscuits in the oven to bake, she'd yelled a warning to Gramps to watch them, and she'd streaked out of the house and made for the hills on foot, forgetting to eat something in her rush to be gone before Orin came.

So now she scrunched her nose hungrily and dug her hands into her levi pockets. At this very blessed minute Gramps was probably munching chicken and urging more golden biscuits on Orin. Both of them stuffing on food she'd cooked, while she shivered and starved on the hillside. She got to her feet.

The day had been Indian summer warm, but with night falling the wind turned chill. Kris turned toward the north to face it, and saw a flickering light on the far side of the next ridge. A campfire?

Kris didn't stay to ponder. She did her thinking on the run, as she hurried down the hill, swerved across the valley, and worked her way up toward where the fire gleamed. A rustler would know, most likely, the T Fork was a run-down little ranch with just a girl and a crippled old

man to run it. Kris slipped through the brush, not knowing exactly what she could do if there did happen to be a stranger with a running iron at the fire, but darn certain she wanted to see who was camping on the place.

Easing around to a thin place in the brush thicket, Kris knelt and worked a spy-hole in the salt cedar, peered through, her breath all tight and knotting in her lungs.

There was no one there. Just a fire, spearing proud and lonely in the dark.

Kris jumped up and as she did hands fell on her shoulders—strong, big hands.

Whirling, speechless with fright, Kris brought up her fists and battered at the man. She couldn't make out his face, and she didn't try to; she just wanted to be loose.

"Easy—" He laughed softly, gathering her hands up to his chest, stilling their frantic beating. "It's all right, honey. I won't eat you." He laughed again.

Kris caught her breath. She stopped fighting. Staring at him in the shadowy light, she knew she'd never seen him before. If she had, she wouldn't have forgotten. Laughing, wide-spaced gray eyes and a smile that melted the ice at her heart so it pounded outrageously.

"Say!" He tilted her chin up, facing her toward the fire. "What're you doing out alone. A girl like you ought to have a guard riding shotgun right beside her all the time."

The pleased wonder in his voice made Kris feel safer, and hence more angry at the way he'd scared her. She wrenched away from him. "With a rustler on the prowl, our cattle need guarding worse. Howcome you camp here instead of going on to the house and asking us to put you up for the night?"

"Hmmm." He set his head on one side and grinned at her, just like he enjoyed practically being called a rustler. "Well, ma'am, if you want me to visit that bad, I reckon I can manage to drop by and bum my grub for a couple of days. Let's go."

That wasn't what she had meant at all, and glaring up at him, Kris knew he knew it. "You—you!" she hissed, whirling away. He got in front of her with aggravating ease.

"Wait'll I kick out the fire. Guess it'll be all right to leave my horse here, won't it? I turned him loose there in the valley."

Kris kept walking, dodging under his arm. "You better just move on, stranger."

"Shucks, I couldn't leave you to walk home in the dark. Never have a good night's sleep again if I did. Be with you in a jiffy!"

HE SPUN back toward the fire and Kris plunged through the night, hearing him stamping at the blaze. Someplace back there, hidden in the brush, was there a long iron like a poker? A rustler's iron? And yet he'd laughed and acted so darned confident. She shook her head, angry at the quick warmth that shot through her at the memory of his hands.

Maybe he had just been putting on a good act. Anyway, who did he think he was, grabbing her like that? She bit her lip, ran right into a fallen tree trunk, and stumbled across it, falling in an inglorious heap.

Strong fingers went around her shoulder, an arm shot beneath her legs, and she was being lifted, high and helpless against his chest.

"If you can't walk without getting hurt, I'd better carry you." His chuckle drove everything but smarting fury out of her.

Heedless of the pain in her bruised knee, Kris turned against him and slapped him good and hard. Just as hard, and even faster he caught up her face and set his mouth on hers, a mocking kiss that lengthened and changed into something else till she stopped pushing at him, suddenly, crazily, losing her fierce will to be free, knowing only that the strength of his arms hurt, but was sweet, too.

He set her down then, and she was shaken, her legs wanted to fold up. She spun away from him, shamed anger choking hot in her throat.

"Wait!" he called, and now there wasn't any taunt in his voice. But Kris was past caring. She went stomping through the

brush with her eyes so full of tears she couldn't see.

And then all of a sudden, there he was, striding a little way off to her left. "You keep going this fast," he observed, "and you'll be puffing like a winded pony." Kris sucked in her breath. Of all the nerve!

"If you don't leave me alone, if you just plain insist on coming home with me—you know what?"

"What?" The hint of a laugh in his voice triggered what was left of her temper. She put her hands on her belted waist and dug her heels back in the grass.

"You'll get mopped up, that's what!" Orin had never been whipped in a fight yet, and he'd been in plenty of them. It was one of the things that gave him that cocksure, tough way of acting that riled Kris most of the time.

Right now it didn't. No matter what else he did, no matter what his hard, golden eyes said, Orin had never jerked her up and kissed her, or—made her feel so weak and funny. It wasn't right; it was downright indecent for a stranger to do that, even if he was honest. And she wasn't sure about this one. He didn't seem to take anything seriously.

"You think so?" he quizzed. "Your pop that ready to run young men off?"

"My grandpop," she fairly yelled, "would probably try to skin you, but he's too old. I reckon Orin'd finish the job. You better beat it out of here, stranger, while you're able."

"Call me Dave," he said smoothly, as if she hadn't even been ranting at him. "Dave Stedman. I think I ought to meet this Orin, especially if he's the Orin Cartrell I heard about in town. Didn't he get the ranchers all organized to stop the rustling hereabouts?"

Wouldn't anything shake this—this Dave loose? There had been a fleck of sarcasm in his last words, and, flushing, Kris heard herself arguing the exact opposite of what she'd told Gramps the night before.

"Yes, Orin shaped up a vigilance committee. I bet it won't be long till they get some results, either! The Cattlemen's Association hasn't done any good, and the darn sheriff hangs around town all the time."

"I'm for peace," Dave said sunnily. "And a man of noble ideas like your Orin must be, too. So I reckon I'll see you home." In spite of his good-humored tone, Kris knew perfectly well she might as well try moving the hill she walked on.

"All right," she said bitterly. "Come along. And then you'll get me in trouble. Gramps is mad because I went off this evening, and if you come back with me—"

Dave halted. The lights from the house a couple of hundred yards away were watchful and bright—the way Orin's eyes would be. Kris felt cold and scared all of a sudden, as if she couldn't stand to go up and answer his probing, sullen questions. Dave took her hands and his fingers felt warm and—well, sort of kind.

"I guess I'll postpone the visit. I may give you hell myself, but I don't want anyone else doing it. Sweet dreams, Angel Eyes—and say, don't let that Orin kiss you the way I did!"

SWEET DREAMS, Dave'd wished her! Kris hadn't had any. The little sleep she'd worn herself into after tossing and turning most of the night had been broken up by crazy little flash-dreams where Orin was holding her and spoke with Dave's voice, or where Dave stared at her with his face hard and set the way Orin's had been when she walked in the door last night.

Kris was glad to get up, get to work, though her body ached and she was tired clear through.

Limping in while she poured the steaming coffee and set biscuits on the table, Gramps stood by the table a minute in accusing silence before he gave in to hunger and sat down.

"Hope you're satisfied with your little trick, miss!" Gramps took mouthfuls of jam and biscuit and glowered at her. "Orin was so mad last night he like to have blown off proper. And then you come in and go right straight to bed without hardly speaking to him. He'll get another girl—"

"Wish he would!" Kris gritted. "Now don't bawl me out for what was your own doings! You invited him on your own and that's exactly how you got to entertain him."

Gramps jaw clamped shut, he swallowed hastily, and then just as his mouth flew open again, a knock sounded on the door.

"C'mon in!" Gramps shouted, wasting his stored breath. He shot Kris a baffled just-wait-till-later glance as the door swung open. Orin came in, giving his hat the tiniest dip as he stared at Kris.

A muscle ridged white in his tanned jaw then, and he swung towards Gramps. "Anything you need from town? I'm driving the wagon in, getting a load of fence posts."

"Why," said Gramps in gusty relief, "I reckon not. Kris might."

Orin swerved his head around at her, and the first sunrays turned his light hair to close-curled silver, strange against his dark skin. "Kris can go along. She can shop around while I tend to business."

"Sorry," said Kris, her tone telling him she wasn't. "I've got to ride out and look at the north fence." Gramps looked unhappy and she felt shamed regret that she'd made it sound like she had to work, not run around. Gramps felt bad enough about not being able to ride and work the way he used to. She swallowed the last of her coffee and stood up.

"I mean, Orin, I just don't want to go with you."

His eyes blazed, yellow-hot. He took a short step toward her. "Think over what you say! You might get into trouble—"

Gramps scrambled to his feet, leaning his veined old hands on the table. "Easy, Cartrell! Watch how you talk to a lady!"

Cartrell's face went ugly and sneering for a second; then he seemed to remember something, and shrugged, heading for the door. "Sorry, Mr. Tarrant, I lost my temper. See you later, Kris." He strode out. After a minute, Gramps glanced away from Kris and went to the door. "Hey, Orin! Try to prod that durn sheriff into coming outthis way, will you? We can't afford to keep losing cattle."

Orin's voice boomed back, rough and confident, and Kris squeezed her eyes shut, imagining as plainly as if she'd seen it, that bluff superior look there'd be on his hard-jawed face. "We won't need that stuffed badge, Mr. Tarrant. I have an idea we'll wind up that rustler ourselves or scare him plumb out of the country. Of course it'd help if I could keep a closer eye on your place. Well, be seeing you!"

GRAMPS came back inside, and Kris pretended to ignore his worried glance, stacking the dishes in soapy water. "Kris—don't you like Orin a bit? Or is there some other fellow?" Gramps asked.

Kris banged the dishes together, flushing at the memory of Dave Stedman, the moment there in his arms when she'd stopped fighting, and—wanted to kiss him back. A perfect total stranger! She bit her lip.

"No!" she answered Gramps. "I—I just don't like the way Orin acts so pushy, so darn sure he can run everybody! And I won't marry him, or anyone, just to get help watching the cattle." Gramps turned away with a heavy sigh, and she added quickly, gentling her tone. "Let's not be beholden to anyone, Gramps."

He patted her shoulder clumsily, with a flash of pride in his tired old eyes. "You're my girl, honey. We'll manage."

As soon as she finished the dishes, she put a kettle of beans on to cook, and then went out to saddle up and go check the north fences. As she rode past the ashes of the fire beyond the hill, she wondered where Dave Stedman was—and if a man with a smile like his could really be a thief. . . .

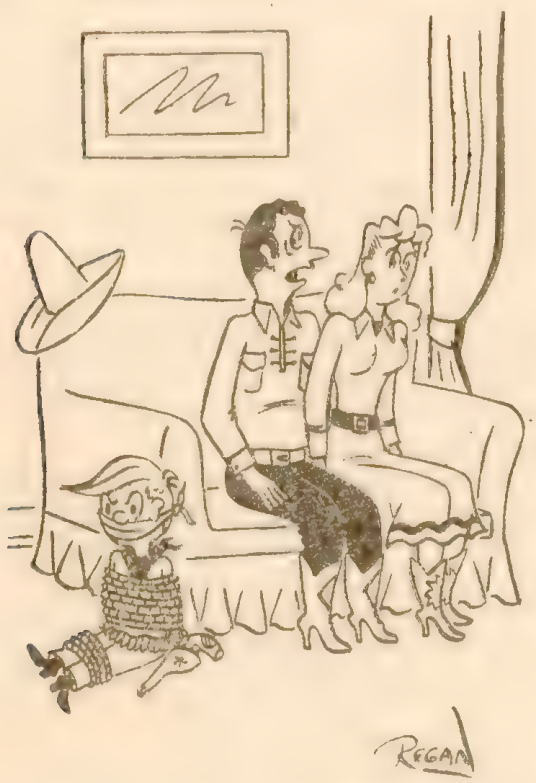
The fences were all right. Kris doubled back through the hills where she'd seen some scattered cattle grazing earlier, and as she came round a sharp-curving slope, the scene in front of her seemed to jump up and slap her in the face.

Dave Stedman! His back was to her and he was doing something with a piece of wire, holding it up against a saddled horse's flank. Kris gulped and dug her

fingers into her reins. That horse, the one Dave was messing with, it was Gramps's.

As he whirled she saw that the wire in his hand was shaped like a brand, like Orin's Long Arrow mark. Dave looked surprised but not scared and somehow that made Kris even madder and achingly disappointed. He—he didn't look like a sneak, a low-down coyote who'd steal from an old man and a girl.

"So you steal horses, too?" She took



"Now, let's see. Where was I?"

a desperate pride in hearing the way her words came out, mean and fierce and not showing the way her heart felt, all squeezed and cold.

"Huh?" He lifted a dark eyebrow. "Now wait a minute, honey! I was just comparing brands. See how nice this arrow fits over your T Fork?" He fitted the wire over the brand on the horse's hip again, then tossed the telegraph wire to Kris.

"I see a lot of things." It took an effort to move her stiff lips. "For one thing—this wire isn't big and easy to spot, like a running iron."

Dave nodded, but his eyes were suddenly cold as ice on the creek. "Sure. And don't forget, lady, I can bend it into any brand I want to—share the wealth, you might call it."

Staring down at him, Kris fought the suffocating urge to put her head down and cry. She'd wanted his kiss, she'd almost stayed in his arms. And here he was making fun of honesty. Hot anger came to her then, and she leaned forward, spitting the words at him in a whisper.

"If you don't want to hang, you'd better kill me. Because I'm going to tell the vigilance committe about you, Dave Stedman!"

There was a strange questioning in his gray eyes as he put a hand on her saddle's cantle and horn, boxing her in.

Blood rose and beat in her ears. Dizzied by a thing that was fear, but something warm and throbbing, too, Kris looked down at him and kept still and taut by only an effort of will.

"Would you?" he asked softly. "Would you, darling?" He pulled her down into his arms, held her against his chest, and she heard the pound of his heart under her cheek and arched back in panic.

TURNING her face away, she knew an utter helplessness as he forced her head back in the angle of his arm. Then his mouth moved warmly on hers, insisting, promising, till all strength left her and sweet fire fanned along her veins. In a crazy, unreal moment she knew her lips answered his, that her arms were going around his neck— He moved back.

That headlong eager warmth died in her, and reality surged back with a slap. She wrenched free of his steadying hands.

What was she doing in the arms of this thief who was stealing right under her eyes? Kris whirled to mount, avoiding his offered hand. "I—I hate you. Clear down to the ground!" she hissed, and wished to her soul it was true.

Dave Stedman shrugged. "So you're a

liar, and I'm a rustler. We'd make a real nice team. Now run along and tell Cartrell on me, Miss Tarrant. They might even let you watch the hanging."

Kris whirled her horse before Dave could see the tears well up in her eyes. He was a stranger and had treated her as no other man had dared to. But deep in her heart she knew, and hated herself for it, that she'd rather the rustler had been anyone else. Even thinking of Gramps's horse and the telegraph wire bent into a brand couldn't change that. . . .

Kris fixed dinner and told Gramps the north fence looked fine. She didn't tell him about his horse being snugged under Dave Stedman's saddle. Instead, she cleared up the dishes and got down Gramps's old shotgun.

"Where you going with that?" he growled, peering suspiciously over his glasses. Kris turned in the door, tightening her hand on the barrel.

"Thought maybe I could shoot a rabbit for supper. Give us a change from beans and bacon." She left before he could remind her she hated to kill even mice.

Dave Stedman might do a lot of things, but he wasn't making off with Gramps's only horse besides the one she rode. Maybe she could scare him into leaving the country before Orin could catch him and hang him the way he deserved. Only she doubted this, remembering the strong stubborn set of Dave's shoulders.

Oh, she thought, catching her breath in a sob, why did he have to be a rustler?

She heard the voices long before she came in sight of the men. One sounded like Orin Cartrell—if it was, he'd made a quick trip to town and back. Kris swung her horse up the side of the hill and got on the trail that passed behind brush and shrub growth thick enough to keep the bunch down the valley from seeing her till she wanted them to.

Shifting the shotgun so it wouldn't bump her knee, Kris saw something move in the bushes ahead. She rode closer and jumped as the animal broke into the open. It was Gramps's horse, still wearing Dave Stedman's saddle; and it was coming from the direction of the men down below in the valley.

Kris went cold all over and then her heart lodged in her ribs like a hunk of ice that was sharp around the edges.

Dave was down there! And Orin had caught him—Orin and his bunch of angry, ready-to-kill-first-and-worry-later ranchers. Kris urged her horse up beside the riderless one and caught the trailing reins. She started down the slope, towing the reluctant beast with one hand and gripping her own reins and the shotgun with her other arm and hand.

They would hang Dave, unless she stopped them. And she had to, because she loved him. The minute she admitted it to herself, she felt a funny sort of clean peace, damned funny when you stopped to think she was upsetting law and order to free an outlaw.

KRIS RODE out of the brush and nudged her horse down the slope to where the knot of men stood, gesturing and talking with plenty of brimstone and strife in the air.

"Let's hang him right damn now!" Orin was demanding, jerking his elbow toward Dave, who stood with a man on either side of him.

"Now just a minute, Cartrell!" Kris recognized the sheriff from town as the little wizened man made a pleading, helpless motion towards the angry cattlemen, bunched like a pack of hunting dogs. "Let's take him in for trial."

"Like hell!" rasped Orin. "We caught him with that telegraph wire, didn't we? That's plenty of proof!" There was a rising swell of consent and a mass motion toward Dave. And then the men facing Orin and Dave saw Kris, and churned to a halt. Matt Silklan, a neighbor, raised his hand and motioned at her.

"You ride on, Miss Tarrant! This ain't nothing for you to see!" Orin whirled. His eyes dilated, then glinted harshly as he stared at her.

"Come to see your lover hang?" Stepping closer, he said through his teeth, low so no one else could hear, "If you don't

want me to tell these folks how I seen you hugging and kissing this fellow right before noon, you turn around and scoot!"

Kris dropped the led horse's reins and brought up the shotgun in the same motion. Dave's eyes were on her in a kind of wonderment she thought was scorn—he thought she'd come back to help a man who'd robbed her.

"All right," she said, to Orin and the men behind him. "Just stand away!" Then, without moving her head, she called to Dave. "Get on that horse and get out of here b-b-before I let them hang you!"

Orin's head jerked back and the veins in his thick neck swelled with shock and passion. "Get my rope!" he called over his shoulder. "I'll hang him with it no matter what this crazy girl says!"

"Shucks, Cartrell," Dave drawled. "Why not just use that piece of wire you got in your jacket pocket?"

Going white, Orin's hands curled toward his belt, but Dave already had the shotgun out of Kris's limp fingers, pointing it at the blond man.

"Sheriff," Dave called. "You step up here and see if our friend doesn't have a piece of telegraph wire in his pocket—the same kind he wanted to hang me for."

The sheriff moved forward, gulping fearfully. Orin was in a crouch like a trapped wolf. "Sure, I got wire," he half screamed. "I—I been fixing fence with it!"

"You said that was enough proof," Dave reminded with a shrug. "But to clinch it—" He put his free hand in his shirt and pulled out a wallet, tossing it to Kris. "Get out that little card in the first section," he told her. "The one that shows I'm from the Cattlemen's Association."

Orin bent for his gun; it flashed in the sun like a coiling snake, and then clattered from his hand as Dave's shotgun crashed. Blood welled from between the fingers Orin clamped on his wrist with a yell, and in that moment Gramps bobbed up out of nowhere, waving his cane.

He'd hobbled all the way from home, Kris thought, staring at him, and then realized he was so mad that he could've hiked clear to the north fence without knowing it.

Only it wasn't Dave he was poking his cane at, it was Orin. "You—you sneakin' polecat!" Gramps shouted, and then whirled to Dave. "You were right, son. Those hides you sent in to be checked showed an old brand under the new one—this hyena's long arrow mark that fits so nice over my T Fork and several other ranchers' brands. I didn't believe you at first, but those hides don't lie!"

The sheriff had gotten together enough sand to slip handcuffs on Orin, helped by some pretty embarrassed and curious ranchers. Gramps came out of his rage then enough to see Kris.

"Kris!" he spluttered. "What're you doing here? I thought you was hunting rabbits!"

"I—I—your horse—" Kris gasped. Things were happening too fast, but sort of pleasantly. Because Dave had his arms around her and was lifting her down.

"Your grandfather loaned me the nag, but I didn't tell you this morning because—well, I wanted to know if you loved me."

Kris jerked free of him, knotting her fists. Worry her to death, would he! "I don't love you! I—I—"

"Fibbing again!" he laughed. "What'll it take to break you of that?" The way he kissed her put any further thoughts of doing anything at all but loving him clear out of Kris's head.

As she lifted her arms behind his neck, she heard Gramps chuckle and kind of sniffle at the same time. "He's a rustler," Gramps said. "A doggone good rustlin' man!"

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SKY-HIGH VALLEY

A SIDEWINDER CAN CHOOSE the time and place for striking. Unfortunately, his victim can't do the same

EVEN if the world's full of people, only a few of 'em ever mean much to each other, or get tangled up in each other's lives. Like a certain long, lean cowboy and his old dog, and a scrawny little killer who was as mean as any pair of mountain rattlers that ever crawled up into Sky-high Valley. And a golden-haired girl.

Her name was Peggy Jordon. She was nineteen. She should have been starry-eyed that afternoon, for she was making her own wedding gown. But her eyes were troubled, and a frown pulled down the corners of her soft, red mouth.

As her wedding day neared, her mind seemed to fill with misgivings. She had a feeling that she was being cheated out of something wonderful, she wasn't sure what. Maybe, like all girls, she'd had her dreams. And Fred Wollen didn't quite match up with them. Maybe because he was some too old for her and kind of hard and grasping.

"You're a lucky girl, Peg," her father had declared. "In this lonely mountain country, it ain't every girl who gets a man who can give her a good home and money."

Perhaps it was the very loneliness of the country that had cheated her. Fred Wollen, owner of the Flying W, was the only unmarried man Peggy'd had a chance to meet. So how could she be sure?

With an impatient shrug, she draped the shimmering white gown over a chair back and stood up. She was not a tall girl, slim and willowy, dressed now in a clean blue gingham dress that snugged against the soft curves of her young body and matched the deep blue of her eyes.

She went into the kitchen for a water pail. She stepped through the back door and stood beside the rough pine wall of the old Lazy J ranch house, feeling the spring sunshine against her cheeks, letting her eyes wander along the great snow-capped peaks that surrounded her world —Sky-high Valley.

Hurrying along the crooked, pine-shaded path, she felt the quick

MISS

By ***BEN FRANK***

Her arms tightened a little, and the earth started spinning

pounding of her heart, and the rare atmosphere of the valley made her breath come and go rapidly. Stepping around a tumble of boulders, she dropped to her knees beside the cold, bubbling spring.

It was a lovely spot, with the music of rushing waters, the great boulders and rocks with bits of quartz gleaming like jewels in the trickles of sunlight that filtered through the tall trees. She reached out to fill the pail. But a movement caught her eye, and she froze in horror.

The rattler was a big fellow. He'd crawled out on the rocks to sun himself. He drew back his ugly head. All he needed was a scream or a movement to trigger the attack.

But Peggy Jordon neither moved nor screamed. She scarcely allowed herself to breathe as her eyes followed the swaying, hissing head. Rattlers were not common in the valley, but she knew enough about them to realize that she could not escape by any sudden move.

Now she could hear the angry buzz of the rattles above the rushing water. A sickness began to fill her. She knew she could not maintain her cramped, awkward position for long. One move, and death, horrible and violent, would close in. Then something at the edge of the clearing caught her attention, and she shifted her gaze without turning her head.

PEGGY saw the dog first. A big old shaggy dog of uncertain ancestry. She knew he was old by the stiff way he moved, and blind in one eye by the way he held his head. Then she saw the tired-looking roan, the young man in the saddle, and the sixgun in the young man's hand. At almost the same instant, she saw a burst of flame, and the swaying ugly head exploded and was no more.

With a sob, she stumbled to her feet. Suddenly the earth began to spin, and she had to clutch a small aspen for support. The next thing she knew, the man was beside her, steadying her.

"A pretty close shave, miss," he said, grinning. He had a lean brown face and gray eyes. He was maybe twenty-one or two. There were both gentleness and strength in the way he held her in his arms. "Nothing to be afraid of now, so you might as well take it easy and—"

His voice had suddenly turned husky. Looking up into his eyes, she saw the expression of wonderment. And something ran into her and went racing through her body, making her aware of the fact that she was a woman in a special man's arms.

Instinctively her arms tightened just a little. Again the earth spun like mad—this time, not from fear and horror, but because of some great inward emotion, the like of which she had never felt before.

She knew he was going to kiss her. She knew it and wanted it. She closed her eyes. She felt him draw a great unsteady breath. She felt his lips hard against hers, but the pain didn't matter. Nothing mattered but the blinding wonder of the moment.

But the moment passed, and they pushed away and stood staring at each other out of startled eyes.

He was the first to recover. He pulled his hat from his shock of thick brown hair and tried to grin.

"Sorry, miss. Guess we both got kind of —of excited over that rattler."

She lowered her eyes and felt her cheeks flame. The old dog limped up and sniffed at her feet. She reached out and patted the big shaggy head.

"I never was so frightened in all my life," she said, shuddering. "If you hadn't come along, Mr. —"

"DeLong. Macey DeLong. But call me Macey."

She wanted to look at him again, but was afraid to meet his eyes.

"Old Red seems to like you," Macey said across the uneasy silence. "He don't make up with just every one."

The big dog was a safe subject, and they both knew it.

"I like dogs," she said. "He's old, isn't he?"

Macey nodded, and a sadness was in his smile.

"Thirteen, which makes him an old, old man. Going blind—"

"You think a lot of him, don't you?"

"Yeah." Macey nudged Red gently with a toe of his scuffed boot. "I was a pretty small kid when my dad and mom gave him to me about a million years ago." He lifted his wide shoulders and grinned. "Say, you haven't told me your name."

She told him. She could meet his eyes now without feeling faint. He looked tired and trail-worn—like he'd been doing a lot of traveling without much sleep. And now he was glancing along his back trail, as if he expected someone to be following him.

"Where there's one rattler, there's usually a mate," he said, picking up a stout stick. "So if there's another one here, he ought to be spooked out and killed."

THAT was when her father and her kid brother, Bud, came hurrying up through the pines.

"Heard a shot," John Jordon panted. A tall, spare man, he was well past middle-age, and the high altitude winded him easily. Seeing Macey, he stopped and stared.

Young Bud had spotted the headless snake. He picked it up by the tail and held it out at arm's length.

"You—you shot off his head, mister?"

Macey grinned. "Never did have any use for a rattler with a head."

Bud was sixteen. Unconcealed admiration in his voice, he said, "Gosh—what a shot!"

"And just in time, too," Peggy said. Briefly, she told what had happened.

Old John held out a big calloused hand. "I guess we owe you something, son," he said a little unsteadily. Then he glanced at Peggy. She was looking at young DeLong in a way that sent a prickle of unease through the old man. He wanted the best for this lovely, clear-eyed girl. A steady, hard-working husband like Fred Wollen—not some drifting cowboy—

But Macey was speaking. "Came in from the south. Saw this valley from the pass, and it's quite a sight. All these snow-covered mountains and the pines and—I don't suppose you have many visitors, Mr. Jordan?"

"No," John answered, suddenly finding a new worry in the question.

"Saw some ranch buildings near a grove of pines."

"That's our ranch—the Lazy J."

"And those buildings way off to the north?"

"Fred Wollen's place, the Flying W."

Macey DeLong turned to look back the way he had ridden into the valley. The pass was a dark, empty streak between two gray masses of granite walls.

"I like it here," he said softly. "Maybe I can find a job on one of the ranches—"

"Dad," Bud spoke up quickly, "just this morning you said that if we could only find another hand—"

John Jordon frowned. Again he glanced at Peggy. Her eyes were hidden from him. But he owed Macey a great debt; and, anyway, Peggy was no fool. Soon she would be married to Fred Wollen.

"Well, if you think you can stand living in this country, forty miles from nowhere—"

"I can stand it," Macey said, and he turned and smiled at the girl.

It wasn't until after supper that they went into the front room, and Macey saw the wedding gown draped over the chair. He'd stood in the yellow lamplight, rolling a neat cigarette with his long, quick fingers, smiling, telling Peggy how much he'd enjoyed her cooking. Then his eyes had drifted and fixed on the white, shimmering gown.

Watching him, she saw the cigarette go to pieces in his fingers. Suddenly she wished she'd thought to put it away. But he'd have to know about her and Fred sooner or later.

"Yours?" he asked, his voice sounding hollow.

"Yes," she answered.

SHE CAUGHT UP the gown and ran into her room. She hung it in a closet and then sat down on the edge of her bed. She didn't try to fool herself. Macey was the man who fitted into her dreams.

I've known him less than three hours, she thought. And all I know about him is that he can shoot straight and quick, and that he loves that old dog like a brother!

She was still sitting there, puzzled and worried and a little frightened at the sudden turn in her life when she heard a knock at the front door. She knew who it was. Fred always knocked in that slow, demanding way.

She crossed to the mirror, brushed back her soft, bright hair and straightened her dress. By the time she went into the front room, her father had made the introductions and was telling about her adventure with the rattlesnake.

She said, "Hello, Fred."

The rancher turned to look at her. He smiled, but his eyes were angry. It was as if he'd somehow guessed what had happened in her heart.

"Hello, Peg," he said.

He took her small hand in his and tucked it possessively under an arm. He towered over her, thick-shouldered, red-faced, a man who expected to get what he wanted, one way or another.

"Figured we might take a moonlight ride," he said. "So I drove over in my new buggy."

She risked a quick glance at Macey, but his eyes were hidden. She found a light coat and went with Fred out to the fancy rubber-tired buggy he'd had freighted up here from St. Louis. She climbed in quickly before he had a chance to help her. Grunting, he heaved himself up and sat down heavily.

"Any special place you want to go?" he asked.

She shook her head and leaned back against the deep leather cushion. The top was down. Through the thin, clear air of the valley, the moon and the stars looked almost close enough to touch.

As they drove out across the level grassland, Fred began to talk of the wedding.

"Maybe we ought to set it up a couple of weeks sooner," he said, putting an arm across her shoulders.

"I couldn't be ready by then."

He let it go. He filled his pipe and lit it, the smoke looking like white mist in the moonlight.

"This stranger," he said gruffly, "must be pretty handy with a gun. You know anything about him? Where he's from? How come he drifted up here?"

"Nothing at all," she answered.

Fred puffed at his pipe. She could sense the anger and jealousy in him.

"Something mighty peculiar about him," he growled. "It seems to me your pa's kind of foolish to give a stranger like him a job. Even if he did shoot that snake."

She didn't try to defend old John, or stick up for Macey. She just sat there, feeling kind of lost and helpless, and let Fred have his say.

Later, when he pulled his matched grays to a stop in the Lazy J driveway, she leaped down before he could touch her.

"Thanks for the ride, Fred," she said, hoping he'd go on.

But he dropped down beside her, took her in his big arms and kissed her roughly. "Four weeks seems like a long time to wait," he said in an angry voice.

She fled into the house. It was pitch-dark. She sat down by a window and stared out at the gleaming, snow-capped peaks.

PEGGY knew how it was. She'd let herself be talked into promising to marry a man she didn't really love. And now that Macey had come along—

She remembered his kiss and the gentle strength of his arms. She put her face in her hands and cried. Even if her tears didn't settle anyhing, she felt better for letting them flow. . . .

Macey DeLong turned out to be a top-hand. Peggy knew he would be the first time she saw him cast a loop.

As the days passed, she saw old John's liking for the long, lean cowboy grow, even if he did have his suspicions about a man who would come riding up into this lonely valley and never mention his past. As for young Bud, Macey showed him some rope tricks and how to shoot from the hip. Bud just about worshipped the ground Macey walked on.

Then one Saturday when her dad had gone to town for some supplies, Peggy stood in the doorway, watching Macey and Bud ride up from the north. Old Red lay in the sun. For the first few days, the dog

had followed Macey about; but now that he was sure this was home, he was content to take it easy. He began to thump his tail. Even if he couldn't see that far and the wind was wrong to catch Macey's scent, he knew his master was approaching.

Macey hit the ground with a jingle of spurs. "We're going hunting, Peg. Want to come along?"

"Snake hunting," Bud added, grinning. "Macey still thinks that rattler had a mate."

"Sure," Peggy said. "I need some wash water from the spring, too, so you can carry it for me."

They gathered up pails and went down to the spring, old Red tagging along behind. They cut stout sticks and beat the bushes. They turned over rocks. Old Red got pretty excited and did some digging around himself. But they didn't find a second rattler. Pretty soon they gave up and sat down to catch their breath.

"I reckon that sidewinder was a lone wolf," Bud said.

"Where I came from," Macey murmured, "those kind of sidewinders come in pairs. Of course, there are certain sidewinders who don't team up with anyone."

Maybe he'd said more than he'd intended to say, Peggy thought afterwards. Anyway, he glanced at her and then looked away in a hurry.

"Where do you come from?" Bud asked innocently.

"Southeast of here." Macey was grinning again.

"What town?"

Macey hesitated just a second before he answered.

"Clayton Center."

They went back to the house, not talking much.

So Macey DeLong was from Clayton Center, Peggy thought. She'd heard of the trail-end town. At the moment, she couldn't remember how or when, unless Fred Wollen had mentioned the name. Occasionally he went south to buy feeders.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Macey roll and light a smoke. She hadn't been alone with him much since that first meeting. She had an idea that was the way he wanted it, and sometimes it made her feel like crying. Suddenly she made up her mind.

"Bud, I'll need two more pails of water."

Grumbling, Bud hooked a pail over each arm and left her alone with Macey. She wouldn't have much time for talking to him, she knew, so she plunged right in.

"Tell me about yourself, Macey," she said.

STARTLED, he looked at her as if she'd sprouted an extra pair of ears. Then he grinned through a haze of blue smoke.

"That'd be the dullest story you ever listened to," he said.

Now that she'd made the plunge, he wasn't going to stop her that way.

"What are you running from?"

He was on his guard now. He chuckled and said, "You call working on the Lazy J running from something?"

He had her there. But she squared her shoulders and looked him straight in the eye.

"What I mean is, you must be afraid of someone or something back in Clayton Center. Are you an outlaw?"

Macey threw back his head and laughed. "Me, an outlaw! What do you think of that, Red?"

Red put his head on Macey's knee and whined softly.

"Poor old fellow," Macey said, his voice suddenly a little husky. "I reckon he'll be plumb blind before snow flies. We've had some good times, Red and me. Bad ones, too. Got lost in a blizzard once, but Red knew the way home."

Then as if a little ashamed of his show of affecion for the old dog, he walked away toward the horse barn.

Red limped over to the girl and sat down beside her. She put an arm about his neck.

"If you could talk," she whispered, "perhaps you'd tell me the things I want to know."

Unhappy, a little frightened because she was not sure of the future, she sat there in the late sunlight until Bud returned. Then he went off someplace to look after

some calves that were the beginning of his own herd. . . .

Along toward sundown, John Jordan returned home, but he wasn't alone. He'd met Fred Wollen in town, and Fred had ridden out to the Lazy J with him.

"Might as well stay for supper," John said.

"Thanks." Fred glanced at Peggy. "If I won't be too much trouble."

Old Red had wandered out to meet them. He wagged his tail at John; then sniffed at Fred's boots. He stiffened slightly and maybe growled. Peggy wasn't sure. But she saw Fred's face tighten, and he backed up a step and squared off. He happened to have a short length of halter rope in his hands.

"Get away!" he said and lashed the old dog across the muzzle.

Frightened and angered, the girl started forward. Red bared his almost toothless jaws, and this time there was no question about his growl. Cursing, Fred lifted his arm, and the rope snaked out viciously.

"Hold it!" Macey DeLong gritted.

He'd stepped from the horse barn. His face was as white as death.

Something in his voice stopped Fred. Snarling, the big rancher wheeled to face the younger man.

"If you want to use that rope on somebody, try it on me!" Macey said. "Not on an old dog that can't fight back!"

"Take off that gun," Fred said, "and I'll show you a thing or two!"

MACEY unbuckled his gun and flung it away, and Peggy felt a weakness strike at her knees. The men were well matched. They would give no quarter. It would be a fight to the finish—and she knew she was the underlying cause of the trouble.

But John Jordan had leaped to his unhitched buckboard. Catching up a new single-tree he'd bought in town, he stepped between the two men.

"There'll be no fighting on the Lazy J as long as I can stand up and swing a club!" he roared.

Macey was the first to turn away. He squatted down and gently rubbed the old dog's ears. Peggy felt a cold anger building up in her. A man who would strike a dog to strike at the man he hated—

Fred had swung aboard his big black horse.

"Wait, Fred," she said calmly. "I'll go with you."

Looking surprised, he dropped to the ground beside her; and she walked with him into the pines where they couldn't be seen or heard.

She looked up at him. His face was still flushed, his eyes hot with anger. He towered over her, but she felt ten feet taller than he'd ever be.

"I'm not going to marry you, Fred," she said quietly.

It took a minute for that to soak in fully. Then another minute for him to find his answer.

His thick lips curled. "Suits me fine," he said harshly. "Wouldn't marry some damn fool filly who'd let every drifter that came along turn her head!"

With that, he swung into the saddle and rode from sight, lashing the big black cruelly with the halter rope.

For a shocked moment, Peggy stood motionless, her face white as chalk. Was Fred right? Was she that kind of a girl? But her moment of doubt passed. Head held high, she walked back to the house.

Macey wasn't there, but her dad stood on the front porch, waiting for her. He took one look at her white face and guessed what had happened.

"You sure you did the right thing, honey?" he asked.

"I'm sure." She found a smile. "Very, very sure!"

Old John looked stooped and tired, and felt that way, too. He knew the score. It was Macey DeLong who had come between Peggy and Fred. Which maybe was a good thing for now he wasn't sure he wanted his daughter to marry a man like Fred. But he wasn't sure about Macey, either. Macey was a good hand, but too close-mouthed about his past.

John was still standing there, worrying, when young Bud came in.

"What's happened?" Bud asked. "Met Fred down by the line fence. His horse looked like he'd taken a gosh-awful beating. And Fred's face looked like it was on fire."

John told him that Peggy and Fred had broken up.

Bud's eyes shone. "Good! Maybe now Macey and Peg will—Gee—wouldn't that be something!"

John didn't say anything. He didn't have the answer.

"Funny thing," Bud went on. "Fred asked if I'd ever learned where Macey came from. Told him it was Clayton Center. He just grinned and rode on."

"Clayton Center, you say?" John Jordan muttered.

He went into the house, found paper and pencil and began a letter. It was addressed to the sheriff at Clayton Center.

"Sir," he wrote in his cramped scrawl. "Would you kindly send me information about a man who calls himself Macey DeLong. He is around six feet tall. Has brown hair and gray eyes. He—"

Scowling, he tore the paper into bits. Things, he reckoned, would just have to work themselves out. He couldn't pry into a man's past like this.

Never occurred to old John Jordon that someone else in the valley was writing a similar letter to Clayton Center—and wouldn't hesitate to mail it.

DURING the next few days, Peggy didn't see very much of Macey, except at mealtime, for this was a busy season on the Lazy J. Then one evening after she'd finished her work, she walked out under the stars, and there he was, leaning against the board fence and staring up at the moon and the stars that seemed almost close enough to touch.

She didn't say much. Simply, "Hi, Macey." And then she leaned against the fence beside him, just feeling happy to be so close to him. Old Red was there, too, and he sat down beside her and thumped her left foot with his bushy tail.

Presently Macey dropped his cigarette and heeled it out. Then he did something that made her heart beat like a tom-tom. He reached out, put a big gentle hand under her chin and lifted her face. For a minute, he stood there, looking at her, with his heart in his eyes.

"The first time I saw you," he said, "I knew how it was going to be with me. Then when I saw that wedding gown, I almost packed up and moved on. Maybe I should have. Then maybe you'd have married Fred and—"

"No, Macey!" she said breathlessly. "I knew how it was going to be, too."

That was when he took her in his arms. But he changed his mind about kissing her and just stood there a couple of minutes, looking off across the silvery landscape.

"Guess it's time I was telling you why I left Clayton Center," he said. "I left so I wouldn't have to turn killer."

Listening, she began to get the picture. Macey was a kid whose father had been a great lawman, a man who had lived and died by the sixgun. A man who had made enemies, and one of his enemies had outlived him. Coop Cowan was this man's name. A rat-eyed little gunman, spoiling for a fight with his old enemy's son.

But Macey had seen too much of gunfighting and bloodshed. He knew how it was when you turned killer. It was kill or be killed, and he didn't want that.

He wanted to work with horses and cattle. He wanted to find the right girl—a girl like Peggy Jordan—and settle down to the business of building a home. So he refused to let Coop Cowan prod him into a fight, even if folks around Clayton Center did think he was a coward.

"But," Macey said, his voice tight, "Cowan got old Red cornered one day and started beating him. I couldn't let him do that. I had to fight him then, and Cowan fights only one way. With a gun."

"So you killed him and ran," Peggy said in a small, tired voice.

"No," Macey said, grinning faintly. "I outdrew him and then couldn't kill him. Maybe it's just the way I'm made. Anyway, instead of killing him, I just put him out of circulation for a while."

Suddenly Peggy felt all her fears and worries vanish.

"Oh, Macey," she cried softly. "All the time, I've been afraid that something terrible was wrong. But this—"

Macey put his hands on her shoulders. For a moment, she was sure he was going to take her in his arms again, tell her how much he loved her. But he didn't.

He said a little harshly, "You don't know Coop Cowan. That was the first fight he ever lost. For a gunman like Coop, whose reputation is at stake, there's just one thing to do. Find me and kill me—or be killed himself!"

Suddenly she was trembling. "But, Macey, he'll never find you up here."

"He'll find me," Macey said flatly. "Anytime I stay in one place very long, he'll find me."

MACEY'S arms tightened about her, and she clung to him. She put her cheek against his chest and felt the roughness of a shirt button.

"Macey," she whispered, "take me with you wherever you go. We'll go a long way off, use some other name, never tell Bud or Dad or anyone where we're going—"

She was talking foolishly, and she knew it. She could not run away like this. Besides, Macey was not the kind to take her away under these conditions.

"We won't run, Macey," she said. "We'll face it together."

"No, Peg," he returned. "It's my battle." His lips found hers and held them for a long breathless moment.

With that, he walked away from her. The next day, Coop Cowan rode into Sky-high Valley.

Peggy was alone in the house, putting together some raisin pies. Cooking and keeping house were two things she liked to do. And maybe one of these days, she'd be keeping house just for Macey—and maybe a couple of kids. Peggy laughed and shook back her bright hair. Then she heard the knock.

Wiping the flour off her hands, she hurried to the door. The little man took his derby off his thin, graying hair and smiled pleasantly. He was breathing hard, but the altitude usually made newcomers do some puffing and panting. It never occurred to Peggy that this kindly man was Coop Cowan—even when she realized the bulge under his neat store coat was a gun.

"Good day, miss," he said, bowing gallantly. "I'm afraid I took the wrong turn someplace and have lost my way. Could you tell me how to find the Flying W ranch?"

She guessed she'd invite him in to rest and catch his breath. She smiled and opened her mouth to speak. Then she got a good look at his eyes. Eyes that made her think of a half-starved rat. Right then, with a terrifying shock, she knew who he was. But any girl who can look a rattler in the eyes and keep her head—

She smiled and said, "Yes, I can direct you to the Flying W." She told him quickly, wanting to get rid of him so she could find Macey and warn him.

"Thank you, miss." He touched his coat pocket, and she heard the crackle of paper. "Just had a letter from my old friend, Fred Wollen. Thought I'd pay him a short visit. Perhaps you are acquainted with him?"

"Yes," she answered, praying a little now that he would leave before old Red came wandering around—or Macey himself.

"Another old friend of mine lives up here someplace," Cowan said. "Macey DeLong. Perhaps you could tell me where I might locate him?"

"No," she began. "I don't—"

"I know where Macey is." It was young Bud. Unobserved, he had stepped around the corner of the house. "Macey went down to the spring to fill a water jug." Bud returned Cowan's friendly smile. "Just step around the house, mister, and you'll see a path leading into the timber. Follow—"

PEGGY ducked into the house. She cut through the front room, through the kitchen, out the back door. She ran, her fear like a cold hand squeezing her

heart. Reaching the pines, she glanced back. Coop Cowan had come around the house.

Fighting for breath, she ran on.

She rounded the tumble of boulders and stopped beside the gurgling water. Macey was not in sight, but the jug stood on a flat rock.

"Macey!" she called.

There was no answer.

She leaped across the stream. Running had sent her heart pounding furiously. She could hear the quick rushing pulse of blood against her eardrums. It was a little terrifying.

"Macey!" she called again.

"Here I am."

His voice came from behind her. Turning, she saw him step from a thick cluster of bushes, old Red at his heels. Then she saw something else.

Coop Cowan had just rounded the boulders.

There was nothing friendly or pleasant about him now. He had a gun in his fist. His breath came in gasps, making his thin nose flare. His lips were drawn back from his teeth, making him look like a wild animal ready for the kill.

Peggy screamed, but her cry had nothing to do with what happened. Old Red had already caught Cowan's scent. Too blind to see, he followed his nose. Snarling, he leaped at the man who had once beaten him.

Cowan's gun angled around and flamed. Red went down. But he got up and charged. Cowan's second shot jolted him, but it didn't quite stop him. Even with life running out of him, the big old dog hit the man at the knees and sent him stumbling back against the boulders.

By then, Macey had his gun up and was ready.

But Macey didn't shoot, and Peggy knew how it was. He had to make a choice. It was either turn killer, or keep on running away from Coop Cowan. And in Macey's moment of indecision, the little man took aim and fired.

But he missed. He missed and screamed. And then Peggy saw the rattler. A big fat fellow that had crawled out on the rocks—the mate they'd never been able to corner. It was the death song of the snake's rattles that had made Cowan miss when he fired at Macey.

Fangs bared, the ugly head flashed forward, and Peggy screamed again without knowing it. But an inch away from Cowan's scrawny throat, the head exploded, and the thick body thrashed violently among the rocks and fell against the man's legs.

You would have sworn that it was an impossible shot. Yet Macey DeLong had made it. Made it with the skill and quickness of a born gunman. Peggy hadn't heard the gunblast for her own scream. But she saw the curl of smoke from the long gunbarrel. Then a hoarse cry drew her eyes back to Cowan.

He had staggered to his feet and was kicking and stamping at the headless snake. She had never seen anyone look the way he did—gasping, eyes bugging horribly, face twisted and colorless. Suddenly his fingers clutched his skinny chest.

Turning, he cried out, pitched forward and lay still.

"His heart, I reckon," Macey said. "This high altitude, and running here from the house. Then the shock of seeing that rattler—"

His arms were about her now. And now, she knew, he would never, never let her go. Then she saw him looking beyond her, a great sadness in his gray eyes. Turning her head, she saw what he was looking at. Old Red, who lay in a still, twisted heap on the trail.

"It's much better to die that way," she said gently. "Giving his life for the man he loved, rather than growing entirely blind and helpless."

"Yeah," Macey said, lifting his shoulders. "And if there's a happy hunting ground for dogs—"

He let it go at that and tipped her face up to his.

Rise and Fall of Bullfrog

a true story

by

Bob and Jan Young

SHORTY HARRIS wiped away a vagrant drop of O Be Joyful Juice clinging to his whiskers, then leaped against the Tonopah bar. "I've got the world by the tail on a downhill pull," Shorty bragged to no one in particular. A few miners

turned to listen because Shorty had already found and frittered away several million dollars in gold discoveries.

"C'mon now, Shorty," Ed Cross said nervously. "You got a tech of heat."

Shorty pulled away, snorting angrily. "You know better'n that, Ed. Look here, boys." He took out a small chunk of greenish ore, flecked with the telltale yellow of gold. "Who's teched with the heat now?"

Cross was still trying to stop Shorty's babbling when he was dissolved in the growing throng of miners, gamblers, and hangers-on. Shorty didn't want for drinks the rest of that evening. Everyone was trying to pry the secret of the green ore from him. And Shorty opened red eyes in the morning to find a half-filled bottle beside his bed. Beneath it was a document proving he'd sold away his claim for a thousand dollars. Whatever he believed the discovery to be worth, Shorty was equal to the occasion of having greenbacks in his kick. He weaved downstairs and ordered a full case of whiskey, then pounded a row of nails around the top. On each he hung a tin cup. "The drinks is on me," he called.

Few stayed to drink his whiskey; even the most ardent drinker had his sights on Shorty's latest find in the Bullfrog Hills, just north of Death Valley. Wintons, Marmons, Pope-Toledos chugged out of town, and they were followed by every other imaginable piece of transportation from wagons to wheelbarrows. One man cried because he couldn't buy a burro for $500 to carry him to the new strike. And though the discovery eventually produced more than three million in gold, Shorty's quick dissipation of his share seemed to foreshadow the short-lived future of the burgeoning city.

For Rhyolite, despite the rock-like permanency sound of its name, was born in 1905, matured during the next year, slumped into a coma the following, and died in 1911. "Believe It Or Not" Ripley once featured the boomtown, observing Rhyolite had achieved perhaps a century of civic progress in a matter of two years, peaking its rush with 14,000 residents.

And indeed it did seem it would last forever. Ninety thousand dollars built the First National Bank, $20,000 the high school, and two railroads did a land-office business bringing in gamblers, miners, and the red-gartered girls.

For Tonopah Tess, Flaming Jane, and the Skidoo Babe all were there, ready to meet competition. And once the struggle became so desperate these ladies of the evening had dodgers circulating throughout the town demanding the male population desist patronizing the girls from the Adobe and Unique Concert Halls who were offering their wares at a cut rate.

RHYOLITE ROSE figured in affairs there too. Johnny Sullivan, bartender at the Bevis & Jenkins saloon, believed he had the inside edge with Rose until Jim Clayton, generally conceded to be a first-water bum, tried to horn in. Rose gave Sullivan the nod, and they were married. Clayton, who already had one wife in Colorado, swore he'd get Sullivan for taking his girl away from him.

A few weeks later Clayton settled down to a poker game at the Bevis & Jenkins saloon. Sullivan was tending bar that night, and when he saw Clayton come in, borrowed a pocket gun.

When the game broke up, Clayton walked to the bar, called Sullivan a foul name and reached for his gun. The gun was in a hip pocket, and it stuck momentarily between his corduroy pants and overalls.

Sullivan didn't hesitate. His first shot pierced Clayton's body. Even desperately wounded, Clayton kept tugging at his stuck gun until it came loose. Sullivan had run into the office for a heavier calibered gun, then returned to the front of the bar. Clayton, though now fatally wounded, managed to shoot Sullivan. Both men died there on the barroom floor.

Not all differences of opinion ended in gunfights, however. One resulted in a horse race. "Sweet" Smith rode into Rhyolite and stopped at one of the town's many watering places, in this case the Louvre. Sweet Smith argued good-naturedly with the proprietress over the saloon's name.

She maintained it was named after a famed bistro in the French capital. But Smith won his round of drinks by proving the Louvre was an art gallery rather than a French gin mill.

Winning one argument and fortified with several rounds of cooling drinks, Sweet Smith started a brag he owned the fastest horse in these here parts. There were several others, with money to back their opinion, that allowed as he didn't by any damn sight. Bets were placed, and Sweet Smith swung into the saddle, ready to race against one of the local best.

The laugh was loud and long when Sweet Smith lost the race by a wide margin.

The winners bought several rounds of drinks as they discussed the race. Sweet Smith seemed to get drunker, but actually he was pouring his drinks into the cuspidor.

"Mebbe my horse wasn't as fast as I thought," Sweet Smith mumbled, "but I'm a fast man on my hind legs, shee? Hic!"

No one took him seriously at first; then bets began to pile up on the bar, and with Sweet Smith egging them on, he stood to win or lose a fortune on the race's outcome.

Sweet Smith, indeed, proved to be a very fast man on his hind legs. After he'd won and scooped up the money, Smith admitted to having been a champion European runner. The horse race and the subsequent drinks were just the build-up to the foot race, which he knew he could win.

The bettors took the fleecing good-humoredly; after all, it was only money they'd lost. And they all joined in clipping the next bunch of suckers, this time getting in on a sure thing with Sweet Smith.

ANOTHER MAN named Smith, "Fingering" Smith this one was, left an odd imprint on Rhyolite's transient history. Smith had a passel of children; wilder than desert burros, and he publicly insisted Rhyolite provide schools for them. Seemed like a good idea to everyone, and as long as Smith was the only one with children, he was appointed as a committee of one to arrange things.

Smith went to San Francisco and ordered about a thousand dollars' worth of school equipment, everything from dunce caps to dust rags, and had it sent C.O.D. to Rhyolite. By the time the stuff arrived everyone had forgotten about the school, and besides that, Smith had gone to Oregon. But a pair of civic-minded men borrowed enough to get the school equipment. Now a building was needed. With characteristic faith that had built hundreds of other boom camps, a school of stone was built, and a $20,000 bond issue floated to cover its cost.

But Rhyolite was already mortally stricken and there wasn't enough money. There were still a few astute citizens left, however, and the school's assessment district was extended to include some of the mines still working. The school was paid for after it had already started to decay.

Today the roofless, stripped building stands gauntly reminding tourists of the fleeting moment of glory which was Rhyolite. Many sturdily constructed buildings remain in the ghost town: the bank, several stores, the Bottle House (constructed of empties at a time when they were the cheapest building commodity) and the Ghost Town Casino. This expansive building was once a bustling railroad depot, but today glasses clink hollowly in the huge building as travelers stop and toast the memories of those long gone.

It was near the depot that Walter (Death Valley Scotty) Scott first began to attract the attention of writers; attention which is still given him today as he presides over his mysterious desert castle. Scotty arrived in Rhyolite from Goldfield after working there as a swamper and a muleskinner. With him was a Chinese helper, who was refused service in one of the restaurants. Scotty, with a sense of principle and publicity, ordered two complete meals to take out. When prepared, he and the Chinese squatted in the middle of Armagosa Street and ate their meals. Scotty was no fool, and he is a gentleman.

It was also near the depot that "Death Head" Lockett met his match—or at least his intended match. Death Head (a nickname which gives a strong clue to his ap-

pearance) wanted a wife, and lacking local prospects turned to the matrimonial journals for assistance. He selected one, and when her photo was mailed back, Lockett promptly mailed $80 to cover the train fare to Rhyolite. Lockett was waiting for the train to come in dressed in his highbutton shoes, checkered suit, and straw hat, when his mail-order bride spotted him from the coach window.

With that one look she decided she'd made a serious mistake in ever taking the train to Rhyolite, but she wasn't going to compound the error by marrying that cadaverous gent at the station. She rode onto Goldfield, where within two weeks she married another miner.

Death Head Lockett was puckered but not too embarrassed to sue for his $80. The judge took one look at Lockett's grisly face then decided even a mail-order bride would have a right to be disappointed, and decided against Lockett.

It was a few years after Rhyolite was deserted that Shorty Harris walked through its empty streets, peered into the empty buildings, and turned up empty whisky bottles to be certain they were completely dry. Shorty smiled as he thought of the $1000 and the huge jamboree that had been given him for his claim.

"Guess I got the best of it after all," Shorty muttered. "Why, I could buy the whole danged town for $1000 now, and not need to set up any drinks, either. I wonder who tricked who on this deal?"

What's in a Name?

NOBE, the Paiute, liked the white men and wanted to do things their way. Accordingly he took a job at Knapp & Laws general merchandise store in Hawthorne, along in the 1880's. Nobe noticed the white men got great delight from drinking, and the store owners made a good deal of money selling whisky. This must be one way to make a fortune, Nobe decided, despite the fact it was illegal to sell Indians whisky.

After hours, Nobe lugged out five cases of whisky and a couple of planks for a bar. He was careful to replace everything, so the theft wouldn't be noticed right away—not until he was in business for himself, anyway.

The first notice of anything unusual came when someone discovered that all the Indians, including Nobe, were gone from Hawthorne. A search was instituted, after first finding the theft of the whisky and then the prints of the Indians in the dust leading from town.

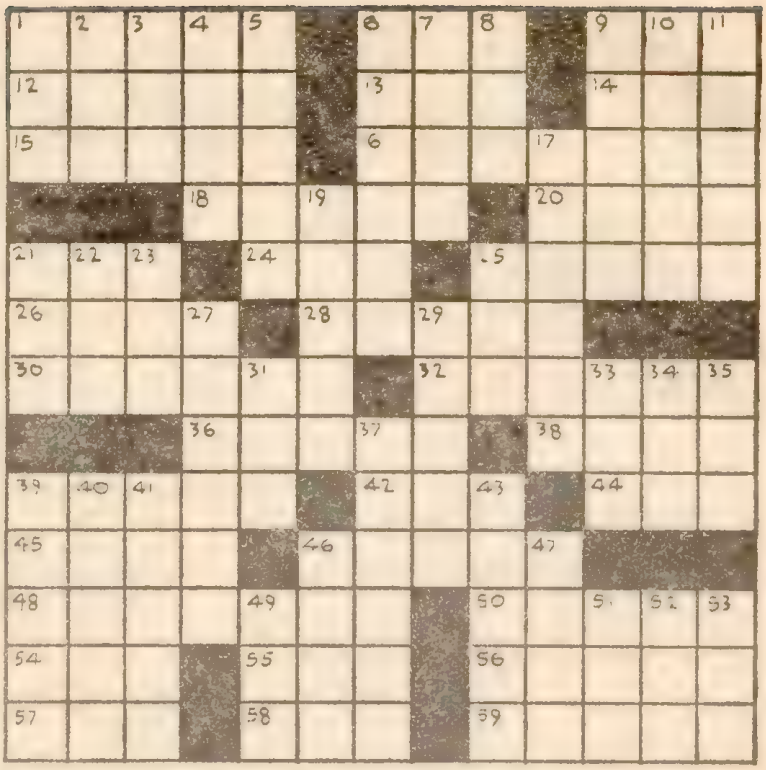
Trackers quickened their pace as they picked up an empty whisky bottle, then another and another. Sixteen miles from town they came upon a scene which has been called carnage. Every squaw, buck, and child from the Indian colony was dead drunk. Many were battered, bruised, and cut, and handfuls of hair had been ripped from several.

Nobe's business had been brisk, but brief. For all the whisky was gone; even the bottles were smashed. And it was a sad, red-eyed Nobe that came to work in the store a few days later. He realized the white man's penalty for failure, and continued to swamp and sweep the floor until he had paid for every drop of his stolen whisky.

But Nobe's adventures were not without recompense of sorts. Sixteen miles from Hawthorne there is a spot known to this day as "Whisky Flat," in honor of Nobe's business venture.

——*Sam Brant*

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1. Cowboy
6. Upper limb
9. To utilize
12. To idolize
13. Fish eggs
14. Mineral spring
15. Kingly
16. Western cattle owner
18. To blossom
20. Part of the foot
21. Cigar residue
24. Foxy
25. Groups of cattle
26. To bring up
28. Motherless calf
30. Indian pony
32. Western squatter
36. "Mountain canary"
38. Irish Republic
39. Western sun-dried brick
42. Little devil
44. Cushion
45. Father
46. Leg joints
48. Cowboys' seats
50. Unaccompanied
54. Compass point (abbr.)
55. Half of two
56. Horseman
57. Sticky black liquid
58. Pea container
59. Western beef animal

DOWN

1. Armed conflict
2. Fruit drink
3. Canine
4. Dull
5. Shouts
6. Western gully
7. To wander
8. Cowboys
9. Theater attendant
10. To drive too fast
11. Noblemen
17. Milk product
19. Less young
21. Curved line
22. Ocean
23. Food for horses
25. To hasten
27. Massaged
29. Dwarf
31. To prosecute
33. Waiter's expectation
34. Epoch
35. Stop-light color
37. Washed out suds
39. Item of property
40. Girl's name
41. Command
43. Juicy fruits
46. Form of lotto
47. Slash
49. To cut off
51. Lyric poem
52. Born
53. To be wrong

Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

"Wish I'd seen him first," Sue said, grabbing up the revolver

Get for Home

By Kermit Shelby

WHEN the cavalry bugle sounded Johnny Padgett jumped straight up out of bed. Johnny's first waking thought was, Oh, my God, I've overslept and now they'll beat me to it!

Grabbing civilian blue-jean pants, he thrust long hairy legs through them into heavy shoes, buckling on his gunbelt as he ran toward the cavalry stables where his pony Buttermilk was corralled. Quite a hunk of young man, creating his own breeze in the muggy September morning.

By the time he reached the corral fence Johnny's sleep-heavy eyes opened enough for a peek at the sky. When he saw the Oklahoma sun—a blood-orange dot little more than head high above the dusty Cherokee Strip territory, grimly promising

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JOHNNY FOUND the home he wanted and the girl to go with it—but the bandits had another idea

more heat to come—Johnny stopped and began to grin foolishly.

Shucks! Wrong bugle. This was the day, all right—September 16, 1893, the day for the Cherokee Run. The right day. But the wrong bugle. *This* bugle was the cavalry's reveille call. Six hours yet before the Cherokee Run. Johnny's roving eyes fell on Pop Truddle and hardened.

Pop—tall, thin, cucumber-cool in white shirt and cotton pants—was innocently wiping the bugle mouthpiece with a clean handkerchief. Pop's thin lips twitched. "You're up early, son. Figure to get a head start?" Imps danced in the bright old Yankee eyes.

"Durn your hide, Pop. You blew that thing under my window on purpose."

"Have to get you loggerheads up somehow. If we aim to sell breakfast to lazy folks, time we got started." Pop was Johnny's Kansas neighbor who had brought his chuckwagon along for the ride. But Pop's thrifty streak believed even a holiday should pay expenses. Pop handed the bugle back to the tall lieutenant, who grinned and nodded to Johnny.

"Got to feed Buttermilk," Johnny said.

"I already fed him, sorry to say. Beth and Lucy wanted their oats. So of course he heard me."

Johnny whistled softly, and two ears perked expectantly beyond the low brush arbor. With a whinny of welcome Buttermilk trotted out, oat flakes clinging to his pink-white nose. Polished mahogany was what his coat looked like, reflecting the sunrays. White-stockinged feet kicked up dust. It settled in a fog, fine as talcum powder.

"Odd name for a mustang—Buttermilk," the lieutenant laughed.

"Raised him from a colt," Johnny said. "Bottle colt. Hey, stop that! I'm plum out of sugar." While the pony's nose nudged his pockets exploringly Johnny kept talking. "After I weaned him he drunk his milk from a trough. Ma had a pet pig. Fed it buttermilk. This critter nearly always stole the pig's milk too, so I named him Buttermilk." Johnny locked both arms around the horse's neck and said sternly, "When that bugle blows today you got to win me a claim. You hear?"

"Look," Pop cried. "I swear he's nodding his head."

"Sure. He found that lump of sugar after all." Johnny held it out. Buttermilk's lips wriggled blissfully. His eyes softened, twin pools of limpid oil.

LIEUTENANT MOTT'S gray eyes swept thoughtfully the three-mile border of tents and wagons. "Looks to be twenty or more for every claim. But he's a fast-stepping mustang. You might win a claim at that."

"Might win?" Johnny scoffed. "We will win." Johnny's eyes were the intense blue of a man who has his heart set.

Thirty minutes later the chuckwagon was rolling up the tent-lined street. Johnny drove Beth and Lucy. Buttermilk was resting up for the run. Pop woke sleep-drugged inhabitants by pounding the rope-suspended steel triangle with an old poker.

"Hot coffee, flapjacks, honey," Pop chanted. "Bacon grease for butter." From the chuckwagon, whose sides let down on rope hinges, tantalizing smells floated from Pop's hot plate—an Indian rock hollowed out for grinding corn which now held a bed of hickory coals.

Johnny could feel the sun on his shoulders and Pop's flapjacks in his stomach. But his shoulders were hotter. With keen interest he watched the small army of dogs who followed the chuckwagon, sniffing hungrily. "I saved this bone from yesterday, Pop," Johnny called. "Which dog you betting on?"

Speculative, Pop eyed the lot. "That spotted hound with the crop ear. He's the lankest."

"Half a buck says it's the brindle bull." Johnny pulled a coin from his pocket.

Pop said, "You're covered."

They stopped the wagon for the event. Johnny had his arm raised to toss the hambone when something froze the motion in midair. The dogs, watchful, made anxious drooling sounds in their throats.

She didn't look like the other strip-hunters. She looked like she had come

from someplace else. Diagonally she walked from the line of tents, holding her red skirt free of the dust. Johnny saw shoulders with a proud set, hair black as night. Her figure was something to look at. But Johnny's eyes couldn't get past her face. Young, it was, yet mature. Pretty, but masked with grim purposefulness. A face of contradictions.

"You drive, Pop," Johnny offered. "I'll wait on trade." Johnny didn't throw the bone. The dogs dropped back, disappointed. She walked regally past them to the wagon.

Pop grunted, catching the abandoned reins. Johnny tied on the white apron, smiling. The eyes she fixed on him were an unwavering blue. She spoke distinctly. "I have no money. I would like to beg a cup of coffee. Black, and strong."

"Black and strong," Johnny said. He drew it expertly from the big coffee pot. The tin cup clicked as he sat it down on the dropleaf side of the chuckwagon before her.

"Thank you." She turned. "I'll return the cup on your next passing."

"Why not drink it here?" Johnny said sociably.

She hesitated. "The coffee is for my father." Her glance swept the row of tents.

"Sure," Johnny said. "For your father."

She stood still while color climbed in her cheeks. The hand holding the tin cup made the faintest movement. She checked it. But not before Johnny had visualized scalding coffee dashed in his face.

SHE TRANSFERRED the cup to the other hand, walking away quickly. Johnny felt as if his skepticism had poisoned the coffee. A powerful force prodded Johnny.

Leaping lightly from the chuck wagon, he ran after her through the dust. "Please, miss—I didn't mean—" Johnny said. The squared shoulders told him he was wasting his breath. Johnny's pace slowed. He followed at a respectful distance.

She turned at the next intersection, down a side street of covered wagons. Two gray horses looked up, placidly munching hay. A hound dog rose from the shade of the tent beside them. Its tail wagged. The girl disappeared inside the tent, not bothering to look back. "Here it is, Dad," she said.

But what a different voice, thought Johnny. The dog sniffed hungrily from the tent flap.

"Get yourself some breakfast?" the man asked.

"Wonderful breakfast. Ham, eggs, biscuit—the man on the chuckwagon was very generous."

Johnny's face turned red.

"You're sure one cup's enough, Dad?"

"One cup is swell." In silence Johnny watched the dog's tail wagging. The cup clicked against wood as the man cleared his throat. "Prince," he said, "you'll have to wait."

Johnny's shoulders straightened. Whistling softly, he walked over, knocked on the tent flap and lifted it.

She looked up, startled. Anger ironed straight lines in her pretty lips. Swiftly her eyes sought the man lying on the cot.

He was about forty-five, Johnny guessed. Big-boned, with wide-spaced frank blue eyes and a firm jaw covered with stubble. His right arm rested in a sling. Dried blood stained the shoulder bandage.

Johnny addressed himself to the man. "I'm Johnny Padgett, sir, from the chuckwagon. I followed your daughter."

Behind her father's back the girl frowned, shaking her head. Johnny ignored the gesture. "We've lots of food up there. Thought I might take your order?" Johnny's eyes met the man's steady gaze. His fingers reached out, softly stroking the ears of the hound, who edged closer.

The man coughed. "Looks like you've caught us at the wrong time. Bandits held us up last night—Sue and me. Took all our money." He nodded toward the gunbelt lying on the foot of the cot. Johnny's glance took in the empty shirt beside it with the sheriff's badge pinned to the pocket.

Johnny said, "Money needn't figure in a case like this."

"In that case—" The man rubbed a flat stomach and grinned. "I'm Jeff Clover, Newton County, Missouri." His left hand

gripped Johnny's right hand, warmly. "This is my daughter Sue."

"We've met," the girl said. She turned hurriedly, washing out the tin cup. It clicked as she sat it down on the camp table at Johnny's elbow. Johnny grinned. "Excuse me. I've work to do." The red skirt made a breeze as it swept past him through the tent opening to the covered wagon.

Realizing anything he said would be heard through the canvas walls, Johnny ventured, "I can't blame your daughter for being down on me. You see, I didn't believe her story. Thought she was playing me for a sucker. So I followed her."

THE SHERIFF smiled. "You're a cowboy, aren't you?"

"And a dumb one," Johnny admitted. "Ain't been around much—that's plain to see. Come out on Pop Truddle's chuck-wagon from Kansas. Figure to stake myself a claim. We've been bunking over at cavalry headquarters."

"Do you know Captain Teague?"

"Pop does. Pop used to be an old soldier. He knows 'em all."

"I was trying to reach the captain last night—when this happened." He indicated the bandage. "Wanted to get him word about a band of thieves that have been raiding the canteen. They've been breaking open grocery stores. Sell their haul to sooners."

"You want me to get word to the captain for you?"

"I'd be obliged if you'd tell him where to find us. It was too late to see him when we hit camp last night. This shoulder had me tuckered."

"Yes, sir." Johnny moved toward the tent doorway. "These bandits— You think they're part of the canteen gang?"

"Undoubtedly. Someone tipped them off we were on the way here. So they laid for us. We stopped to water the horses right after sundown. At a stream about five miles north of here. These two came riding out of the bushes. They had handkerchiefs over their faces. Threw their guns on us and demanded our money. I forked it over. But—" Jeff Clover shifted the shoulder painfully. "I made the mistake of reaching for my gun."

He continued, "When I fell, the big one snatched the purse. His buddy raided our provision box. Saw me bleeding and figured I was done for, probably. So they took to their heels. They rode this way. For all I know they could be hiding right here in camp. In a crowd this size they'd hardly be noticed."

"What did they look like?" Johnny asked.

"The one that drilled me was big and dark. Had a gruff voice. I didn't get a very good look at the other."

"Red-headed," Sue's voice said from the wagon. "Undersize. Looked about thirty." She walked in, her arms full of blankets. She laid the blankets precisely on a camp stool, carefully avoiding Johnny. But Johnny noticed the edge was gone from her voice.

"The big one rode a gray horse. The other—"

"Sorrel horse," Sue said. "They had a dog, too. It stopped to get itself a drink."

"A dog?" Johnny's tone quickened.

"Black and white spotted." This time she looked directly at Johnny. "Bobtail with a black ring around his left eye."

"I'm in the wrong business, ain't I?" The sheriff winked at Johnny. "Sue should be sheriff. She sees more."

"She doesn't miss much." Johnny lifted the tent flap. "While I get word to the captain, Pop will bring you breakfast."

As Johnny moved toward the road he heard a furtive movement behind the Clover wagon. A horse snorted and leaped forward—a sorrel horse—as the rider dug his spur. The dust was a protective curtain but Johnny got a glimpse of the rider, small and red-headed. The hoofbeats faded rapidly.

"Looks like that redhead's still trailing you, Sheriff," Johnny cautioned. "It ain't safe—you with that shoulder."

Sue grabbed the revolver from the cot and ran out to the road. "Wish I'd seen him first." Her eyes darkened.

Johnny said, "I'll tell the cavalry folks to hustle."

Up the road a piece Johnny cocked his head, listening for Pop's gong. Presently it sounded. He cut across in that direction. About ten or twelve tents before he reached the wagon Johnny heard the dogfight. He grinned. Pop had dropped that hambone after all.

The dogs started Johnny's way. Johnny stopped to watch. A black and white spoted dog ran past with a bone in its mouth. The dog had a bobtail.

"Drop that!" Johnny yelled.

The dog cut across a vacant lot, then behind a row of tents. Johnny ran after it. His eyes followed the whirlwind of dust.

A wagon passed and Johnny dodged around it.

The dog made for a tent in an open space, set some distance from its neighbors. It dived under the tent flap. Johnny heard a man cursing. The dog darted out, still holding the bone. It retreated behind the tent, growling at two pursuing dogs. Johnny stood in the middle of the road, wiping sweat and breathing hard.

HE WAS NOTICING the sorrel horse which stood in the shade of the tent, saddled and panting slightly, when the tent flap lifted. A red head stuck out. The man straightened. He was undersize, Johnny noted, but his clothes fit him solidly. Sunlight caught, blinding as a mirror, on the nickel revolver flashing in his hand. Johnny blinked.

"Get going." Pale blue eyes flickered recognition, hardening. "I don't like sheriffs' helpers."

Johnny didn't relish the thought of being shot in the back. The man advanced threateningly. At that moment the dogfight started. Gnashing and rolling, they came straight toward Red's legs. He nimbly side-stepped, turning his head. Johnny let him have a quick blow on the temple.

Red grunted. The gun fired as he fell, but Johnny's well-timed kick of the hand that held it sent the bullet wild. The revolver half-buried itself in the dust. Red's short body measured full-length in the talcum-like softness.

Johnny snatched the revolver. He heard the horse snorting. It's lurch had broken the bridal rein which held it to the picket.

THE RATTLESNAKE

By S. Omar Barker

Nobody loves the rattlesnake.
His poisoned bite is dreaded.
With fear your gizzard's bound to shake,
When on one you have treaded!

But though he has no charming trait
That pleases or delights you,
At least he will most always wait
To buzz before he bites you!

With a quick movement Johnny seized the horse. He was in the saddle by the time Red struggled groggily to his feet. Johnny's left hand held the two ends of the broken bridal rein. His right hand leveled the gun square on Red's heart.

"Turn around," Johnny commanded. "Start walking. And keep your hands up, for I'm powerful nervous."

Red kicked up an awful dust. Johnny soon put an end to that. "Unless you're plum aching for a bullet, walk softer," Johnny ordered. After that Red walked easy. Red's hands, locked casually behind his head, looked almost as if he were a man out for a stroll.

They came to the intersection. Tents and provisions were being moved by four mules and a wagon. Red edged forward, waiting for the wagon to pass. "Come back here," Johnny said sternly. Red moved in next to the horse's nose, almost too close for comfort. Johnny watched every move.

"Where you taking me?" Red asked, as if it really didn't matter.

"Cavalry headquarters," Johnny said. "The sheriff will be tickled to see you." The dust from the wagon was fierce.

Red sneezed, grabbing a handkerchief from his pocket. While Johnny's eyes were on the handkerchief, Red's other hand unexpectedly seized the bridal rein. He tugged, flattening himself against the side of the horse, slapping it violently and yelling.

Johnny's knees dug in as the horse lurched. He was so intent on holding the gun that not till he tried to tighten the rein did he realize he hadn't any. Both loose ends flapped as the horse ran wildly. Johnny had no way to control the speed of the animal.

Making for open ground, the horse ran like a streak. Johnny jammed the revolver in his belt. By climbing far out on the horse's neck and holding to its mane with one hand, he finally was able to seize one end of the broken rein. After that they traveled in a dizzy circle till the horse quieted.

It was probably not more than five minutes altogether before Johnny got the horse back to the intersection. Naturally, Red was gone. Johnny rode by the tent where the spotted dog still worried the bone. The tent flap stood open. Johnny rode cautiously around the tent, then peered inside. The tent was empty.

He headed the sorrel back to the chuck-wagon, guided by Pop's gong. Pop looked up, eyeing the horse. "Thought I heard shooting," Pop said. "Don't tell me you traded Buttermilk off for that nag?"

"Nope." Johnny wiped sweat, disgusted. "Looks like I'm a horse thief without wanting to be. I'm a gun thief, too." He tossed the dusty revolver on the wagon seat.

"Nice shootin' iron," Pop said, and waited.

When Johnny smelled the coffee bubbling he remembered something. "Pop, there's some hungry folks up the road. Mind if we drive that way?"

On the way to the Clover tent Johnny told Pop what had happened. Pop said, "The thing to do is get the girl and her pa to headquarters, where they'll be safe."

"Durn," Johnny said. "I plum forgot. I've got to get word to the captain." He wheeled the sorrel about, pointing out the Clover tent.

"I'll hustle 'em over, bag and baggage," Pop promised. "And keep an eye peeled, Johnny. That red devil's probably got you spotted."

"What harm can he do?" Johnny said. "No horse, and no gun."

"He's got a buddy," Pop said. "Remember?"

CAPTAIN TEAGUE and a number of men, Johnny learned on reaching headquarters, had gone riding over the border, ferreting out sooners who had sneaked across in the night. Lieutenant Mott took over. He rounded up five men.

Johnny left the sorrel horse in the corral, with instructions that it be turned over to the sheriff. He saddled Buttermilk. The lieutenant and his men rode with Johnny back to the isolated tent. The only change

they found was the spotted dog lying in the road. Blood ran from its mouth, a bright streamer in the dust. The bullet hole was clean, just above the black ring around its left eye.

Johnny felt as if it was his fault. "He never got to finish his bone," Johnny said.

"Guess they figured a spotted dog is too conspicuous to belong to thieves," said the Lieutenant. "Well, we'll search the tents."

Several campers, when questioned, admited having heard a shot fired. They thought little of it. Though they invited inspection of tents and wagons, everyone was too engrossed with the thought of the approaching big run to bother with trifles such as bandits. The hunger for land burned in their eyes. It's catching, thought Johnny, feeling the fever himself.

A two-hour search revealed nothing, beyond the fact that there were more tents than seven men could cover, and that the population kept shifting like a huge family of ants. Johnny's eyes kept watching the border. "They're lining up, Lieutenant."

"And you're itching to line up with 'em," the lieutenant guessed. He looked at his watch. "Ten after eleven. If you're going to water and rest up that mustang, you'd better make tracks. Good luck, cowboy." He held out his hand.

Johnny thought that mighty sensible talk. Especially if he was to take time out to say good-bye to Sue.

Jeff Clover was sleeping when Johnny reached the bunk-house, but Sue looked bright-eyed enough, Johnny noticed. She had changed the red dress for a blue one that matched her eyes. Her hair was fresh-combed with a pale blue ribbon twined through dark braids arched above her head. She was something to look at—if a man had time. Her eyes told Johnny she had heard all about his run-in with the bandit.

Johnny explained he had to water and curry Buttermilk. Sue watched through the corral fence. "Pop Truddle told me he likes sugar, so I saved him some." Sue held out her hand.

Buttermilk made up to Sue right away. After that first lump his eyes got soft as a doe's. He stood, docile, while Sue stroked his neck. "What pretty white-stockinged feet," Sue admired.

Johnny wished he was white-stocking-footed himself. "You've spoiled him for good now, Miss Sue. Every time Buttermilk sees you after this he'll be expecting another lump of sugar."

He looked across the horse's back toward the border. Even from this distance you could sense the bigness of it—the land fever, the milling restlessness. Johnny could feel excitement gripping him. It meant more than a man could find words to say.

"When the bugle blows, Buttermilk and me will be lined up somewhere near that scrub oak yonder." He tried to say it casually. "You coming down to wish us luck?"

"I'd like to," Sue said. "If Dad's able to leave." Her busy fingers made a braid of Buttermilk's mane. When she unbraided it again, it left a curl. He'd give a lot to know what she was thinking—her, with her eyes so bright.

Time was sweeping her away from him. Unless he talked fast, said exactly the right words this minute, the crowds would soon swallow her up and he might never get to see her again. This thought brought swift panic. Johnny dropped a curry comb and picked it up.

HE SPOKE, his voice tense. "This claim I'm riding for—" How to say it? "To make a home, it's going to need a woman to live on the place."

With minute concentration, her fingertips stroked the white star-shaped spot on Buttermilk's forehead. "Lot's of women in Oklahoma, I hear tell."

She was making it hard for him to say. Johnny looked at her urgently. "Just any woman won't do."

"I think I heard Dad call." She turned hurriedly.

If he wasn't the blamedest fool. Now he'd gone and bungled it, rushing things so. He stood there, feeling the urge to be moving on. The land fever was in him.

He was leading Buttermilk through the corral gate, feeling lower than a snake's belly, when she stuck her head out. "He's still asleep," Sue said. Her cheeks were very pink. She held out her hand. "Good luck, Johnny." Johnny's heart got lighter than air.

They rode away, Buttermilk's neck bowed, the white-stocking feet prancing for all the world as if they were listening to a big brass band. Johnny waited just a little bit before he looked back. When he did, Sue waved. Johnny waved his ten-gallon hat. Buttermilk shied sidewise.

"It's in the bag, nearly, Buttermilk," Johnny said. His voice shook. He sure hoped he wasn't bragging.

He didn't get a front place in the lineup, but he got a place. Cavalry men in uniform kept strutting up and down, sunlight glittering on their carbines. When the second hand ticked off twelve o'clock noon, the carbines would shoot, all up and down the line. That would be the signal for the bugle.

People who had watches had to keep telling those who didn't have how long it was to go. First it was thirty minutes, then it was twenty-five, then twenty. So many people crowding about, Buttermilk got nervous.

The sun was a brass disc which heat had turned white-hot. Johnny could smell horses and saddle leather. He could hear fretful wives and crying babies—the ones who would be left behind.

Johnny kept looking toward the bunkhouse. The dust shut out everything as figures milled through it. Twenty feet away you couldn't tell if it was man, woman, or beast.

He reckoned she wasn't coming. First he thought the smallish one was her. It turned out to be a boy with freckles. The boy approached as if lost, peering into every face. His eye lit on Johnny and stopped.

"You the one owns the stocking-footed horse?" the boy asked. "If you are I got a message for you."

"Message?" Johnny held out his hand. Sue had wrote him, then. The piece of paper looked as if it had been torn from an envelope. The printing was done with a pencil:

SOMETHING AWFUL HAS HAPPENED TO PA. COULD I SEE YOU A MINUTE?

There was no signature. Johnny didn't think about a signature then. A part of his mind remembered that she called him Dad, but— Where is she?" Johnny said.

"Over here a piece." The boy pointed. "I'll show you."

Johnny swung himself into the saddle, wheeling Buttermilk away from the starting line. "Coming through," he called. The crowd made way for him protestingly.

The freckled boy ran on ahead. He turned down a side row of tents. Johnny's hand tightened Buttermilk's rein. Everyone was on the starting line. The tents looked deserted.

"Right here," said the boy. Johnny's right hand sought his gun. It happened from behind. Johnny felt, rather than saw, the dark thing like eagle wings blot out the sun. The thing settled over his head, tightening. Johnny's astonished mouth tasted wool blanket. The blanket jerked.

JOHNNY fell from the saddle, clutching the gun, kicking desperately to free his feet of the stirrups. Buttermilk lurched forward. Johnny heard vicious jerking on the bridal rein.

"Don't hurt that horse's mouth," Johnny tried to shout. It came out muffled. His feet kicked vigorously. Something whacked his head sharply. Under the blanket Johnny watched red and green stars revolve in a drunken circle. The gun slid from his fingers. Groping hands grabbed it.

"Now, sheriff's helper," said a voice he remembered. "We're saving you till the carbines fire. One more shot won't be noticed then. This pistol and horse will make up for what you stole from me this morning."

"Tie his wrists, Red," said a gruff voice. "I got his feet." They worked competently, silently. Johnny felt rawhide bite as they wound it. A strand of it circled his neck. The blanket became a smothering hood.

"Slip the pole through his ankles." Johnny felt the pole tighten painfully. His shoulders burned as they moved swiftly over bumpy wire grass. Johnny took a coughing fit. He strangled.

They dumped him in a tent. He could feel the added heat and smell the sun-baked canvas. A revolver prodded the blanket tight against his temple. Red said, "You got ten minutes to live, cowboy."

"Hell, Red, stop sounding off and come outside," the gruff one called. "He can't get away. Must be a hundred and ten in that tent. It ain't much less out here."

The revolver pressure eased. Red went outside. "Stocking-footed," Red said depreciatively. "Well, he'll get us to Oklahoma." Johnny could hear Buttermilk snorting uneasily. Remembering the spotted dog, Johnny began to sweat. After they reached Oklahoma, would they shoot Buttermilk too?

He lay there, cursing himself and mad as thunder. Of all the fool tricks. If he wasn't the dumbest— A sobering thought hit Johnny.

Ten minutes. Ten more minutes and he'd be dead. A man shouldn't go to his grave all mad at himself. He ought to go peaceful-like.

Johnny's bound wrists lifted, even with his chin.

But what words did you use? Johnny's lips moved under the blanket. "Lord, I got myself into this mess. Don't look like there's any way to get myself out." The words dried up. What else? "That girl, Lord—Sue Clover. Take care of her. Don't let these thieves shoot Buttermilk like they did the spotted dog."

He guessed that about covered it.

"One more thing, Lord. Help me to go out of this thing friends with myself."

Johnny lifted his bound wrists. They were numb. But the rawhide, softened by the sweat-soaked blanket, had loosened considerably. He found that out as he lifted them.

Johnny sat straight up. After that it was just a matter of straining and sweating. All told, he must have sweat a gallon, more or less.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

A roundup of movie news presented by

ROBERT CUMMINGS

in the next issue!

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Featuring

A review of Universal-International's

TAZA, SON OF COCHISE

starring

ROCK HUDSON and BARBARA RUSH

A 3-D Picture—in Technicolor

•

Plus

A WORD-AND-PICTURE PERSONALITY SKETCH OF

PHIL CAREY

The rawhide stretched pretty good, once he got it started. Johnny shook one hand free. He rubbed it against his leg to restore circulation.

Johnny tore off the blanket. "Thank you, Lord," he said.

"Three minutes to go, Newt," Red said. "I'll see how he's doing."

In a flash Johnny thrust his head under the blanket, rolling over on the loosened rawhide. He held his wrists tightly together in front of him, shifting to his side. His ankles he moved on purpose because they were still tightly bound.

Red stuck his head in, glanced at Johnny's weaving legs and said, "Three minutes, cowboy." He dropped the tent flap.

Johnny worked fast. His legs were still numb when he pulled up the tent peg and rolled under, opposite the tent flap.

THE LOOSENED tent rope made a faint, creaking sound. Buttermilk looked up and whinneyed. Johnny wanted to run but his numbed feet wouldn't make tracks. When he heard the two men scrambling inside the tent he knew for sure he was a goner.

Newt's knife ripped a hole in the tent and he stepped through it. He was a big man with coarse loose hair and a murderous eye. His gun flashed in the sunlight. "Move," Newt said, "and I plug you."

Johnny reached both hands up and said good-by to the blue sky. Buttermilk whinneyed again and Johnny smelled dust. "Yonder he is," Sue's voice said. The cavalry men came riding up behind her.

When Johnny looked around, Lieutenant Mott's carbine was pointed straight at Newt's head, which held very still. Red started to run around the other side of the tent. The cavalry carbines stopped him.

"It's half a minute early," the lieutenant said to Newt, "but I'd as soon shoot now. If anybody moves, I will."

Nobody moved. Nobody but Buttermilk, whose lips kept wriggling while he stamped impatiently, his eyes asking Sue for some sugar.

Johnny could feel the blood running back in his legs. It ran faster when Sue walked over and said, "I was starting down to the scrub oak to wish you luck when I saw Buttermilk's legs coming past this tent. I ran over and I saw it happen. But I liked to never found the lieutenant."

The lieutenant said, "We were too busy looking for bandits to get here sooner." He snapped handcuffs on Newt and Red. "Looks like your gun, Johnny." He tossed over the revolver from Red's belt, and Johnny caught it.

"I've been studying it, Johnny," Sue said, talking fast, "and I think I'd like to live on a claim with you." Their eyes met.

The carbines started firing just as Johnny reached Buttermilk's saddle. The bugles started blowing immediately. They made chills in a man's blood. Johnny and Buttermilk become one, almost, blending in with the others.

For a moment the whole world was nothing but more dust and flying hoofs. But gradually the dust thinned. Then it was just Johnny and Buttermilk out there in front of the others.

What would she think of him, Johnny wondered, when he hadn't even found time to answer her? But the thunder of Buttermilk's hoofs made music in his ear. Somewhere out there a claim waited for him and Sue. He aimed to stake it.

"Get for home, Buttermilk!" Johnny shook the reins.

Buttermilk got for home.

OUT OF THE CHUTES

THE GREATEST SIGHT at the Cow Palace was a cowboy who just sat around and took things easy. Of course, not all of the 138,000 people who attended the Grand National Rodeo at San Francisco realized just how great a sight he was. But anybody who saw Dan Poore's accident at the Pendleton Round-Up, anybody who knew how long and how critically he had lain unconscious in the hospital, felt mighty good to see him up and around.

Dan is a long way from contesting again. He admitted to being pretty shaky on his feet, but he hoped that by the time the season is really under way next summer he'll be roping calves and wrestling steers as expertly as ever.

When Dan had his accident he was in third place in the year's championship standings. He had every hope of winning the roping title at Pendleton, which would have put him into contention for first place. But while the highest paying rodeos of the year were running, Dan was in a hospital bed—and you don't win many points from there.

However, he's not crying over championships that might have been. He knows he won something infinitely more precious—his life.

You never saw top-hands compete harder than at the Grand National. It's the last big money show of the year, and if there were to be any upsets in the annual standings, the points had to be won there. All the striving produced a great show, but it was to no avail in unseating any of the leading contenders.

While we're on the subject of the standings, we'll give you a preview of the champs. This list isn't official because not all results for 1953 are in yet, but the leaders are far enough ahead so that they can't be beaten by the relatively few points unrecorded so far.

The All-Around Champion for the year is Bill Linderman, which makes things just about perfect. Bill is president of the Rodeo Cowboys Association, a contestant for many years, and just about the most popular cowboy in the country.

Saddle bronc champ is Casey Tibbs, also a popular fellow and probably the most famous rodeo hand. In bareback the leader is Eddy Akridge, in calf-roping it's Don McLaughlin, in steer wrestling (or bulldogging) Ross Dollarhide and in bull-riding Todd Whatley.

We'll make a full report on the champions a little later when the results are official and the prizes are distributed at the Great Western show in Denver.

Right now we're supposed to be on the subject of what went on at the Cow Palace—and plenty did.

A cowboy named Bob Henry gets our nomination for the biggest hero—or is it the craziest fool? The crowd of 10,000 seemed divided on the question when they saw him.

BUT BEFORE we give away the payoff of the story, we'd better start at the beginning, when Bob arrived in San Francisco, paid a $75.00 entry fee, and entered the bulldogging contest. In the first go-round Bob jumped from his horse, the bull dodged and Bob missed him clean. His score for that go-round—time: 0; broken arms: 2.

The next day he was sporting two plaster casts, but he didn't go home. People figured he was just staying around to watch the show, but when they saw his antics back of the chutes they were afraid he'd collected a crack in the head as well as a couple of cracks in the arms.

Bob was often observed in a squat, his head tucked against his shoulder, hugging the air with the two pieces of statuary he was using for arms. Finally somebody asked Bob what he was doing—was it a new version of the Bunny Hug or an imitation of King Kong?

It was neither, Bob replied, indignantly, simply practice for the second go-round of bulldogging. He'd paid his entry fee, hadn't he? Well, nobody and nothing was going to stop him from competing.

So it was the sight of a cowboy with two broken arms wrestling a steer that made the crowd of 10,000 gasp. Bob didn't miss this time. He caught the critter's horns in that plaster hug, which held like a vise, and down went the steer in 5.2 seconds, a tie for first place! Bob's craziness—or heroism—paid off at $591.73. All we hope is that Bob's written down a few names from those 10,000 witnesses. Otherwise, when he tells the story, folks are likely to think it's a real windy.

The official hero of the rodeo was Ross Dollarhide, all-around champ of the show. Ross won points in three events—calf-roping, bulldogging and saddle bronc-riding.

The calf-roping winner was Ben Johnson, the movie star who is also a genuine cowboy—or maybe we should say the cowboy who's also a genuine movie star.

The other winners were Bill Hartman in bulldogging, Sonny Tureman in bareback, Del Haverty in bull-riding and Bill Linderman in saddle bronc.

THE COW PALACE was all slicked up with a new roof and a new coat of paint for the 1953 show. (To be exact it took *three* new coats of paint, 2860 gallons, to make the huge arena spick and span.) This maintenance and repair work was part of a long-term plan, which will cost about $50,000 a year, to make the Cow Palace a shining example of what a big rodeo and a stock show plant should be like. The whole thing—arena, barns and land—is worth about $8,000,000, so the annual repair bill isn't as high as it seems.

The Cow Palace was built in 1940, but there was an official San Francisco rodeo long before that. The idea of an annual celebration built around the Western cattle industry started with the Panama Pacific Exposition in 1915.

Three years later plans had been made for another show, but they had to be canceled because of the influenza epidemic of World War I. Finally, in 1921, the show went on, under canvas, at 11th and Market Streets.

As San Francisco grew, it became less and less advisable to pitch tents in the downtown area—you couldn't set up a pup tent at 11th and Market today—and so plans were made to build a permanent plant.

But then the depression put an end to those dreams until 1940, when the Cow Palace was finally completed, having been financed by the state of California, the city of San Francisco, two counties and the WPA.

In 1941 the first Grand National was held in the new buildings. It was so successful that the committee in charge decided that now, at last, the show could become an annual affair. But by the following year the U.S. was fighting a war, so it was not until 1946 that the first of an annual series of Grand National Rodeos was held.

But even then things didn't go smoothly. A violent storm blew down the tents housing all the animals except the blue-blooded show horses, a calamity almost serious enough to stop the show.

The show did go on, however, and has gone on staunchly ever since. New barns have been built, and all facilities are constantly being improved. This year a new type of arena wall was added, complete with a safety moat. The wall is portable and allows the arena area to be expanded to more than 30,000 square feet—a 5,000-square-foot increase.

And nowadays tourists driving by and seeing a huge building a few hundred feet from the road will no longer have to wonder what it is. On two sides of the building it says COW PALACE, in letters 16 feet high.

Adios,
THE EDITORS

"you're not fit to be a mother!"

"These horrible words tumbled through my mind. I could hardly believe it. The one person I really trusted was accusing me of being a tramp! What could I do? Whom could I turn to for help?"

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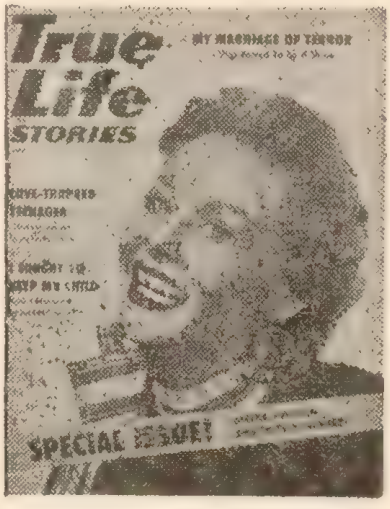

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DESERT CACHE

By Dave Barron

"We can't start over again," she sobbed

THE STORY SO FAR: Wounded by the bandit Salazar's gunnies, DAVE COREY conceals his gold on the Sonoran desert and makes his painful way north towards the Border. But he is overtaken by two men who take the one sack of gold he carried with him, and leave him to die. He comes to in Sand Gulch, Ariz., where TED NEALE and his fiancée, ELLEN WORTH, brought him after spying him from their stagecoach. When he recovers he agrees to fight against the men who've forced Ellen to close her mine, the Dos Cedros.

Neale leaves first for Escala, and Corey and the girl and CHARLES BRUSS, Big West Copper boss, take the stage. A phony holdup takes place and Bruss, in what seems to be a double cross, shoots down four bandits. Now, approaching Escala, Corey wonders if he'll find the answer to Bruss's part in the holdup, or meet the men who robbed him on the desert—or if he'll meet up with HOLLY SHANE ARLIDGE, whom he'd once loved. . . .

PART TWO

ESCALA. In Spanish the word could mean ladder or wall. Or stopover. Once it had been a tiny, sun-baked village on the Mexican side of the Border, a place of refuge and rest for desert way-

farers. Then, with the discovery of rich copper deposits in the vicinity, a mining camp sprang up on the American side.

"Before long it was all one town with just a street marking the border line," continued the driver. "Not the main street, though, on account of old Escala ain't growed as much as the new."

His meaning was clarified when they reached the edge of the rolling plateau and started down a long, rocky grade. Spread out below on a flat piece of desert was the town, its international division clearly marked by an open space about twice the width of an ordinary street. Old Escala, Mexico, was a small village of low, adobe structures that blended perfectly into the coloring and seeming changelessness of its desert setting. New Escala, Arizona, four times as large, had all the markings of a typical bustling American mining camp.

The coach hit the bottom of the grade with a jolt, crossed a shallow dry wash and leveled off.

"Do you have a sheriff in Escala?" inquired Corey.

"Nope!" came the reply. "County seat's north across some powerful rough country. We got a town marshal. Otherwise we sorta make our own laws an' enforce 'em."

This, while not unexpected, added considerably to the potential explosiveness of the situation.

Like its older neighbor, New Escala consisted of adobe structures. As the stage rolled into town, Corey noted various places of business. Saloons . . . stores . . . hotel . . . a large window bearing the legend, Big West Copper Company . . . livery stable. His greatest awareness, however, was of the people abroad. For the most part these were men in rough miner's garb. But he noted a few in more dignified attire, even a professional gambler or two—one of the latter strolling with a bright-gowned woman on his arm. To this pair Corey's gaze clung, his heart pounding sickeningly, until the coach drew abreast and he saw the woman's face. Drawing a deep breath, he chided himself sternly.

For eight years he had entered each strange town for the first time with a hollow feeling in his stomach because he knew it was inevitable that someday his trail and that of another should cross again. But that could not happen here and now. Not even the most perverse fate would choose for that final meeting this place of all places, in which he was bound to remain.

Reassured, Corey dismissed the matter as the coach pulled up before a single-storied adobe structure bearing a sign, Marshal's Office, over the door. Attracted by the driver's shouts, a crowd quickly began to gather. While the driver plunged into an account of what had happened, Corey dropped to the ground and opened the coach door.

Ellen Worth had recovered from her faint, but her face was still white, her eyes dilated, and she leaned heavily on Corey as he helped her to the sidewalk.

"Where do you live?" he queried.

Before she could answer, Ted Neale had fought his way to their side. "You're all right, Ellen?" he cried anxiously.

The girl clung to him. "Yes. No. I mean . . ." Suddenly she noticed the man pressing close behind Neale and her eyes widened. "Father!"

This man was tall, white-haired and benevolent-looking, in a neat gray suit. "There, my dear!" he said in a twangy New England voice. "You're safe and we're together again. Everything will be all right now."

"You might as well take her home, Mr. Worth," came a bit of advice. "She can tell her story later, if it's necessary."

The marshal, a gray-eyed, worried-looking man, had appeared to take charge of the situation. Bertram Worth thanked him and led the girl away. And Corey's attention was drawn back to the more pressing needs of the moment.

CHARLES BRUSS gave his account of the attempted holdup first. When he had finished, the marshal said, "Anybody recognize any of the bandits?"

Corey glanced at Bruss. With seeming reluctance the latter replied. "One was dragged off with his foot in a stirrup. The other two were Mexicans I never saw be-

fore. But the fourth bandit was Jack Farley."

"You sure?" exclaimed the lawman.

Bruss shrugged. "See for yourself when you go after the bodies."

After pondering a moment, the marshal sent someone to fetch a team and wagon. Then he questioned the stage driver and Corey. The latter was careful to conceal his suspicions of Bruss. Neither did he mention the last two words the young dying redhead had uttered. *"He . . . lied . . ."* That was a lead he intended to follow up strictly on his own.

Vouched for by Ted Neale, Corey was not pressed for personal data about himself. Marshal Lott formed a posse to accompany him to the scene of the holdup. When it galloped off, a team and wagon rumbling in its wake, the crowd began slowly to disperse. Neale turned to Corey.

"The *Dos Cedros* office and wagon yard is at the west end of town," he said. "You might as well put up in the bunkhouse there and save a hotel bill. Look over the town this evening. I've spread word I had a new wagon boss coming. The other mine owners and some teamsters will probably look you up. Talk about going back to work soon. I'll see you in the morning about getting lined out."

He hurried away—anxious to rejoin Ellen Worth, reflected Corey, and shrugged.

Saddlebags over an arm, he bent his steps in the direction of the hotel. Neale's invitation to sleeping quarters at the *Dos Cedros* wagon yard had been too much on the order of tossing a bone to a dog. Although Corey realized he might be bending pride backwards out of perverse opposition to the other man, he didn't care. He wanted a hot bath. For tonight at least he would enjoy the best Escala had to offer.

Walking along a board walk, he passed a number of people. And in every face, regardless of sex or age, he read signs of strain and uneasiness. New Escala was a town of tension and fear, with both emotions on the upward sweep as a result of today's stage holdup. The raiders were getting bolder, striking ever nearer to the town itself.

Corey was thoughtful and preoccupied when he entered the hotel. Its lobby was small and clean, with an archway revealing a parlor on one side and batwing doors closing off a barroom on the other. Its shaded dimness seemed dark after the sun glare on the street. Corey had said, "A room, please," before his vision readjusted sufficiently to make out the figure behind the desk. Then he turned to stone.

For eight years he had dreaded this moment, fatalistically certain that someday it must occur. And despite the fact that there could be no more logical place in the world than a boom mining town in which to run into a professional gambler and his mate, he had convinced himself it could not happen here. Now he knew he had been wrong.

An unforgettable voice said coolly, "That will be two dollars in advance."

He realized then that the shock of recognition had been only his. "You knew I was in town?" he burst out hoarsely.

HOLLY SHANE ARLIDGE gazed at him with no glimmer of emotion. "I was part of the crowd drawn by the arrival of the stage," she said. "I saw you then."

She had had time to withdraw and recover composure. The scope of that achievement smote Corey abruptly. The complete self-control she was exhibiting was as inconceivable of the Holly he had once known as an ice pond in the desert. Unconsciously he rubbed at his eyes. And then for the first time he really saw her.

There were physical changes too. Not in her figure. Even at a slim sixteen she had been curving and all woman. She still was. That could not be concealed even by a decorous black gown with a high, lace yoke and long sleeves. The difference lay in her quiet bearing and in her face.

She still had the magnificent black eyes and red passionate mouth of her Spanish mother; her short tilted nose and riotously curly black hair came from her father's side—Black Irish. But her cheeks were thinner, her mouth had learned discipline, and the flash of her eyes was replaced by a brooding, unfathomable expression.

"I—I don't know what to say—" faltered Corey.

"Why not just pretend we never saw each other before?"

"That's possible for you—now?"

She clasped her hands in an old, remembered gesture. "I don't know. I thought it was." The first tremble of emotion came into her voice. "Eight years is a long time. I'd come to believe I was over it—that I could see your side the way Tullery hammered it at me after you left. But now, seeing you alive and well, all the other is coming back."

A heavy feeling of hopelessness settled upon Corey. He said dully, "You tried to kill me once, Holly. I've been running ever since—trying to forget. I can't run any more. If you still want my life for Mike's I'll be any easy target."

White-faced, she did not speak. Corey laid down two silver dollars, signed the register and picked up the key she had placed beside it. Slowly he turned to a nearby staircase. He had one foot on the bottom step, when boot heels pounded across the veranda and a man burst through the front door.

He was of medium height and wore town clothes. Beneath a small black mustache his lips were full and red, and his handsome face had a weak, dissolute look.

"Holly!" His voice sounded hoarse with excitement or nervousness. "Holly, something's just come up! I've got to leave town for a while—"

He broke off, noticing Corey belatedly. "Oh! I didn't mean—" He lifted a handkerchief to a perspiring forehead. "I'd like to see you—alone, Holly—soon as you can spare a minute," he continued jerkily. "I'll wait in here."

Scuttling to a door marked Office, he pulled it open and disappeared into the room beyond.

Corey could no more check the question that sprang to his lips than he could bite off his own tongue. "Your husband?"

She looked at him for a long moment. Then she said, "My brother-in-law, Ross Arlidge. He runs the bar. The hotel is mine." After a slight hesitation, she added evenly, "Tom—my husband—has been dead for more than a year."

Corey found himeslf completely at a loss. Somehow he managed to murmur, "I'm sorry."

She made no reply. Turning, she went into the office and closed the door behind her.

COREY climbed the stairs, found his room and switched the key to the inside of the lock. Moving to a window, he stared down into the street. Intrigue and fear and violence walked hand in hand in Escala. It struck him that there could be no more fitting place for his and Holly's trails to cross again. But not in this way. Not in his wildest imaginings had he pictured such a meeting.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Corey tried to figure a way out of his dilemma. Three cigarette butts lay crushed beneath his heel before he could resign himself to the only course open.

He thought, get this job done. Concentrate on paying off your debt to Ellen Worth and to hell with the two buzzards who left you in the desert. Finish up and get out of Escala as fast as possible—for Holly's sake and for your own.

But in the meantime he couldn't stay here. Not even for one night. To know that Holly was under the same roof, to be aware of her presence every minute, awake or sleeping . . .

Corey leaped to his feet. He was halfway into the hall when he remembered the key and stepped quickly backward, bending slightly to slide his hand around the edge of the door and remove it from the inside of the lock. That slight, unexpected retreat and dip saved his life.

Somewhere down the hall a sixgun boomed. Simultaneously a bullet smacked into the door two inches in front of Corey's nose. He felt the heat of its passage. A crash of breaking glass sounded in the room behind him. And, as sheer reflex threw him backward, the unseen gun roared again.

Corey tripped over the doorsill. For a confused instant he was aware only of his floundering efforts to keep his feet beneath

him. Then he hit the floor with a solid thump. *Holly!*

But even as the thought burst in his brain, he rejected it. Long ago she had tried to take his life for one he had taken, and her hate, revived by the sight of him, could goad her to try again. But not in a sneaking, cowardly fashion. The motive of this would-be killer, covering his door from a position slantwise across the hall, would be of much more recent vintage.

Convinced of this, Corey snapped to his feet, gun in hand. Swiftly he sought another way into the hall, hoping to spring a surprise counterattack. There was a connecting door to an adjacent room. As he turned its knob, however, and found it locked, a tread of running feet arrested him. Not waiting to check the results of his fire, the gunman was clearing out. Tossing caution aside, Corey rushed back to the open doorway.

The hall was empty. From its lower end came a sound of booted feet scuttering down an uncarpeted stairway. Corey raced in that direction, noticing a door ajar on the opposite side from his own, two down. Room Ten. Then he was tearing downward, three steps at a time.

A corridor at the bottom of the staircase led into the kitchen, from which came a busy rattle of pots and pans. A door swinging open to the left led into the passageway between the hotel and an adjacent building.

The passageway contained no sign of life. The fleeing gunman would scarcely have had time to cover the distance to the street. An alley only a few steps away offered the handiest avenue of escape. Corey moved into the narrow lane. The only living thing in sight was a cat foraging in a garbage heap. Oblivious to bad odors, Corey took in the assortment of sheds, out-houses, and adobe wall fences that stretched out in either direction. And he swore aloud, for he knew it would be futile to attempt to flush a quarry out of such a maze of cover.

HOLSTERING his gun, he went back into the hotel. A babble of excited voices drew him to the lobby. There he found several men in miners' garb milling about, while others, less venturesome, peered through the doorway and windows.

"We heard a couple of shots—" began one at sight of Corey.

Corey nodded. "Somebody laid for me upstairs. Threw lead when I stepped out of my room," he said. "I chased him, but he slipped out the side door and got away."

"Know who it was?"

This speaker was tall, with powerful, work-rounded shoulders, and a craggy face adorned with a graying, untrimmed mustache. His bearing and level gaze were prepossessing.

Corey answered him directly. "No. But I've got a few ideas. It's a personal matter, boys, so forget it. Unless one of you spotted some gent heading away from here a few minutes ago?"

No one had. And the explanation that it was a personal matter closed the incident. Exhibiting no further curiosity, in accordance with the custom of the time and place, the quickly gathered crowd began to disperse.

"I'm Sam Jason—owner of the Shamrock Mine," said the man who had questioned Corey. "Like to talk to you, when we've both got a little time to spare. Suppose we get together in the Border Rest Saloon after supper?"

Corey nodded. "Sure."

He watched Jason depart. Then he made his way to the kitchen. Once again he met with disappointment. The hotel cook was a Mexican woman with the face of a squaw and a fifty-inch waistline. Absorbed in the making of enchiladas, she swore that she had seen nothing.

"Where is Señora Arlidge?" Corey asked. "And Ross Arlidge?"

"A bad one—the Señor!" The Mexican woman shook her head forebodingly. "About him I know nothing. But the Señora's head aches—poor little one. She has gone to summon the night clerk to his post before his usual hour."

Corey went back to the lobby and examined the hotel register. Although there was no occupant for Room Ten listed, that key was missing. While the desk was tempo-

rarily minus an attendant, anyone could have slipped in the side door, learned the number of Dave Corey's room and helped himself to any key he chose. Again Corey faced a blank wall. He could be sure of only one thing—the bushwacker would try again.

Shrugging, Corey went back upstairs for his saddlebags. Fifteen minutes later he walked in the shade of a high adobe wall to a solid wood gate upon which were painted the words, Dos Cedros Wagon Yard. The gate was unlocked. He pushed it open and entered.

The yard was deserted. Ore and supply wagons stood about, many with broken wheels and axles. Canvas tops were badly ripped or burned. These would be the wagons damaged in the raids on ore and supply trains. Apparently every one worth salvaging had been fetched in for repair. It would take a great deal of physical labor, as well as fight, to put Ellen Worth's mine back into production. Once more Corey felt a stirring of sympathy for the girl.

There was a corral and stable, a blacksmith shop, an office shack with a padlocked door. A mess hall and kitchen still stocked with food supplies adjoined the bunkhouse, in which a few bunks contained bedding. Selecting a few blankets, Corey carried them outside and draped them over the sides of wagons for an airing.

Presently he stripped to the waist, washed at a watering trough and donned a new shirt purchased in a brief stop at the mercantile. Refreshed and hungry, he

EXPENSIVE MUSIC LESSONS

DURING the 1840's a Yankee captain, Stephen Smith, took three rosewood pianos round the Horn to Monterey, California. As General Mariano Vallejo was very fond of music, he gladly paid $600 for one of the coveted instruments.

But the graceful piano just gathered dust in the Vallejo casa; and each day the general looked sadly at it. Why didn't some music teacher come out to California so that he and his family could learn to enjoy their new piano?

One day a shy German, Andrew Hoeppner, stopped at the hacienda and asked for food and lodging for the night. The gracious host invited him to the table where his large brood had gathered. Hoeppner, delighted with this hospitality, sat down. But suddenly he saw something he hadn't expected to find in the wilds of California! A handsome piano! He murmured a low, "Excuse me, please," walked in, and sat down before it.

For the first time the Vallejo home and its members heard melodies from the world's finest composers. Everyone left the dining room and stood around him, awestruck. Finally Hoeppner stopped and apologized for letting his great joy overcome him; and they went back to the neglected supper.

The general beamed; now he'd found someone at last who could teach them all to play. He begged the German to stay; and soon afterwards, on March 24, 1846, the two men signed an unusual agreement.

By its terms Hoeppner promised to give the general and his family lessons, for as long as five years, if necessary; in return, Vallejo would deed him 4,000 acres of land. Since the general owned about 7,000,000 acres north of San Francisco, he considered this small pay for the musical instruction.

The young man began his lessons at once, worked faithfully, and completed his part of the bargain in about four years and five months. It was a happy day for the general when he deeded this land to the music teacher; and their ability to play the piano afforded them long hours of enjoyment. But unluckily, Vallejo's fortunes diminished; and at his death he owned only about 250 acres of land and a handful of cattle.

The land he so gladly gave Hoeppner later was called the Valley of the Moon (where Jack London built his home) and was worth a million dollars. But the general, during those "splendid idle forties," traded a valuable valley for music lessons and considered he'd made a good bargain.

——*M. R. Krythe*

started back towards the main part of town.

The sun had set; only the ghost of its flamboyant display of color remained in the sky. The first star glittered. In the way of the desert, night would fall swiftly. And in the way of frontier towns, New Escala was stirring to a new and livelier tempo.

There were no longer any women on the street. Men moved, heavy-footed, to and from eating places, stores and barber shop. And they were noisier, as though with nightfall some element of restraint automatically began to give way. Traffic into saloons would soon be heavy. Laughter and the tinkle of a honkytonk piano began to carry through the air. If New Escala harbored fear and sober-thinking during the day, plainly it devoted the night to forgetfulness.

COMPLETE DARKNESS had fallen by the time Corey had eaten supper and set out to keep his appointment with Sam Jason. Windows glowed with yellow light. A boisterous hum filled the air, reducing the wail of a coyote to a thin thread of sound. And a great portion of that hum seemed to emanate from the Border Rest Saloon.

Pushing through a pair of swinging doors, Corey paused to reflect upon the incongruity of this establishment's name. For here, surely, a man might partake of just about anything except rest. There was a long bar with the usual mirror backdrop and the usual nude painting above. There were tables and chairs, gambling facilities, and a space for dancing. Already the place was thronged, the bright-colored gowns and bare shoulders of dancehall girls contrasting sharply with rough male garb and unshaven faces.

A minor commotion drew Corey's attention. In a hastily cleared space a giant with a thatch of flaming red hair was lifting a chair and a girl with one hand. The girl, a thin blonde in a green gown, shrieked encouragement as she was borne upward. Cheers rang out, when the chair was held triumphantly aloft. Then the redhead tipped it, spilling its squealing occupant into the arms of the close-packed onlookers. Throwing back his head, he roared with laughter. Obviously he was well started upon a magnificent drunk.

Corey looked over the rest of the room. Sam Jason sat at a corner table with two other men. Catching Corey's eye, he beckoned him forward.

"Glad you came early, Corey," he said, standing up. "This is the man Neale told us about, boys. Dave Corey." To Corey he explained. "They just got in from their mines. Missed the arrival of the stage this afternoon. This is Jim Trace, owner of the Little Gem Mine, and Bill Baker of the Yucca Belle."

Both men stood up to shake hands. Only Baker spoke. "Glad to meet you, Corey. Have a drink."

An extra glass beside the bottle on the table revealed that they had counted on his appearance. Corey accepted whisky with a nod. Presently emptied glasses were set aside. Jason folded his hands on the table and leaned forward.

"Neale says he explained the situation to you, Corey," he began. "You know, then, that we small mine operators stand or fall together. What do you think of our chances?"

"Of getting the goods on Big West?"

Trace jerked uneasily. "Not so loud!" he growled, casting a quick glance over the noisy throng milling nearby.

He looked older than Jason, short and of wiry build. He had pointed features and deep-set eyes, and he was scared. Corey looked at Baker, who shifted his gaze, reddening slightly. Baker had tremendous shoulders and a bull neck, but his obvious physical strength meant little. He, too, was scared.

Corey felt a stirring of angry impatience. He said bluntly, "If you're that scared of Big West, why don't you sell out to Bruss and be done with it?"

Jason answered in a dry, cutting tone. "Pride holds them back. They can't admit a girl's got more guts than they have. But if Ellen Worth could be talked into giving up first—"

"Cut it out, Sam!" cried Baker hotly.

"You know damn well it's our wives an' kids Jim and me are scared for, not ourselves! What'll happen to them if we get ourselves killed—especially bucking something we ain't got a chance of licking?"

"Why do you think that?" asked Corey.

Baker put both hands flat on the table. "Big West has got too much money and power behind it—political power, in Washington and Arizona both. Any evidence we'd get against Bruss would be hushed up as sure as shootin'!"

"Not if it was big enough to break into Eastern newspapers," said Corey. "They're guilty of hiring Border riffraff to loot and kill on U.S. soil disguised as Mexican rebels. Do you think any amount of money and political pull could cover up an international hornet's nest like that?"

Baker and Trace exchanged glances. The latter moistened his lips. "I reckon not," he admitted. "But getting that kind of evidence would be the sticker. Can it be done?"

"I don't see why not—with careful planning. We've got to lay a trap and capture some of the raiders alive. They'll talk to save their skins, and that will mean the end for Bruss and Big West."

"Sounds too easy," grunted Trace. "How would we go about laying a trap?"

Again Corey felt a thrust of impatience. He said curtly, "Our first step is to start ore and supply wagons rolling again."

"With you as *Dos Cedros* wagon boss?" The question came from Jason. Something in his voice caused Corey to look at him.

"Anything wrong with that?" he said.

Jason checked an answer and tugged at his mustache instead. Once more Baker and Trace exchanged a look. The latter began to grin.

"Not as far as we're concerned," he said. "But others might have a different idea. Tim Shawnessy, for instance. He's the best muleskinner in these parts and a mountain lion in a fight. I've heard tell that Ellen Worth had promised him the job of wagon boss, soon as the *Dos Cedros* opened up again."

"And you figure he won't take kindly to any man she puts over him?"

Trace's grin broadened. "S'pose we call him over and find out?" he said, and pushed back from the table.

DAVE COREY watched him shoulder his way through the noisy throng. A dancehall girl caught at his arm. He disengaged himself and went on. Presently he accosted the brawny redhead who had put on so spectacular an exhibition of physical strength a while ago. At first the redhead shook his head. But Trace continued to talk. When he turned and began to thread his way back to his table, the redhead moved unsteadily in his wake.

Understanding sent anger gushing through Corey's veins. This was the main reason he had been invited to join Jason, Trace, and Baker here this evening. They had not only wanted to size him up personally; they also wanted to put his mettle to the test—their kind of test. Well, to hell with them. Damned if he'd let anyone force him into a senseless brawl.

He told himself these things, but when Trace sidled around the table, clearing the redhead's path to his side, a force stronger than his resolve took him to his feet.

Shawnessy halted in front of him, spraddle-legged. Drink had not effected the clearness of his eyes. They were vividly blue. His nose was flattened and shoved to one side, and his jaw looked capable of breaking an ordinary man's fist.

"So you're the spalpeen figurin' to steal Tim Shawnessy's job!" he said.

He was only half-drunk, Corey realized—a state in which he would be impossible to reason with, yet which would give free rein to the natural trouble-seeking, fight-loving inclinations of his race. Resentment against the three who had contrived this situation burned hot in Corey's veins. Still he sought to ward off the inevitable.

"So you're the Shawnessy I've heard so much about!" he exclaimed, thrusting out his hand. "Glad to meet you, Tim. You and I have got a lot in common. Suppose you let me buy you a drink, while we talk it over?"

Shawnessy blinked. Weaving, his gaze dropped to Corey's out-stretched hand. He

seemed on the point of taking it. But Trace made an impatient gesture, catching his attention. He peered at each of the mine owners, then looked back at Corey. And an outraged expression spread over his face.

"A smooth one, eh?" he rumbled. "Think you can make a fool of Tim Shawnessy, do you? Why, you dirty—"

"You've got it all wrong—

But Trace's voice cut in. "Make him fight for it, Tim! If he's gonna be your boss, make him prove he's the best man!"

Corey growled a protest in vain.

"I'll make you wish you were never born!" cried the Irishman in a tone of unholy joy.

Without changing position, he swung a mighty left to Corey's jaw. Knuckles grazed Corey's cheek as he jerked his head aside. The huge fist whistled by, the force behind it spinning Shawnessy half around. Almost without volition Corey planted a left in his middle. It was like driving his fist into a tree. But the blow caused Shawnessy's guard to drop. Corey took him then on the button, putting into his swing all the bitterness he felt towards the trio looking on.

The impact of fist on flesh and bone cracked like a maul to a fence post. Nearby chairs and tables had been vacated during the course of their brief verbal exchange. Sailing backward, as his feet left the floor, Shawnessy landed squarely in the middle of one of those tables and took it over with a splintering crash.

An average man would not soon have moved under his own power. But physically Shawnessy no more fitted into that classification than did Corey himself. Almost the instant the Irishman hit the floor he rolled over to his knees. In that position he shook his head and directed an unbelieving look at Corey. He heaved himself to his feet. He set himself for a rush.

And at that moment an uproar started in the street. There were shouts and the thump of booted feet running along wood sidewalks. "Posse! Marshal's posse's back!" The cry penetrated the saloon.

In a flash a mere brawl was forgotten. A tide of humanity surged between Corey and the Irishman. Dancehall girls, patrons, housemen—in one accord the entire crowd surged towards swinging doors, drawn outside by the promise of greater excitement in the street.

SHAWNESSY tried to shove through the crowd and reach Corey, but the press of bodies between them proved too great. Borne steadily farther away, he gave up at length and joined the general exodus. Corey waited until the last of the curious throng had evacuated the saloon. Then he, too, stepped out into the night air.

The street seethed with confusion. A company of horsemen and a creaking wagon had already passed. Behind the cavalcade hurried a tide of chattering onlookers. A halt was called in front of the marshal's office. Standing in his stirrups, the lawman lifted his hands and shouted down the tumult of voices. When he could be heard, he began to speak.

"One of the dead bandits is Jack Farley, like Mr. Bruss said. The other three are unknown Mexicans. I've sent for the *alcalde* of Old Escala. Maybe he'll be able to tell us which rebel outfit they belonged to."

"Can't see how that matters a damn," said a miner to a companion. "Rodriquez . . . Salazar . . . Montoya. They's been reports of all three of them bloody butchers running wild through Sonora. Ain't no difference between 'em, far as I can tell."

"Maybe not," came a reply. "But I'd still like to know which one we'll likely have to fight if Escala's ever raided."

The last remark expressed a general sentiment, reflected Corey. It was not mere curiosity alone that held these onlookers in their places. It is always the unknown that inspires the greatest dread. So they wanted a name upon which to pin their fears.

Jack Farley's body was given over to the town undertaker. As the hearse rolled away, a new voice lifted in a Spanish request to be permitted passage through the crowd.

Falling back on either side, the citizens

of New Escala cleared a path for a single horseman. Behind him came an oxen-drawn *carreta* in which rode a man wearing the robes of a priest. The horseman was no *peon*. As he drew rein at the wagonside, the lawman greeted him with formal courtesy.

"Please accept my thanks for coming so promptly, Señor Romulez," he added.

"I grieve that it must be on such a mission, Señor Lott," replied the newcomer, inclining his head. "The good padre accompanies me in the hope that he may be permitted to claim the bodies of our countrymen for proper burial. This can be arranged, no?"

"Sure thing, and welcome," answered Lott. "But first I'd appreciate any information about 'em you can give."

"Of course."

The padre descended from the *carreta* and climbed into the wagon. As the faces of the dead were uncovered, he made the sign of the cross over each one and knelt between two of the bodies to pray. In silence Señor Romulez gazed upon each still face, bestowing special attention upon the one disfigured by the shotgun blast.

"Do you know them?" queried the marshal.

The *alcalde* nodded sadly. "*Sí*. I know them. Juan Perrez . . . Pablo Rojas . . . Ruben Zaccata. All from the village of Acogida to the south."

"Are they outlaws in your country—known followers of any bandit or rebel leader?" persisted Lott.

The *alcalde* shook his head. "They are known only for simple hearts and minds," he said. "In these unhappy times many *peones* listen to rabble-rousers and mistake for patriotism their greed for conquest and looting. Plainly these poor youths were persuaded to leave their homes and join the army of some so-called great and noble savior of *Mejico!*"

The bitterness in his voice proclaimed his strong Federalistic leanings. And he had the courage to speak his convictions publicly, which was a great deal considering that cutthroats such as Salazar might at any time take a notion to sweep this way.

BUT THE POLITICS of Old Escala and its mayor did not interest Corey at the present time. The important thing was that the identities of the slain Mexican bandits had no particular significance. It was what he had expected. The true finger of guilt would not point to any known Mexican rebel leader, but to Charles Bruss. To make sure this could never happen, Bruss had seen to it that the tongues of Jack Farley and the latter's Mexican confederates were forever stilled. Bruss had covered his tracks well—with blood.

Grimness settled over Corey as he watched the two Mexicans depart with their dead. When the marshal went into his office, the crowd began to disperse. Saloons that had been so quickly emptied would be as quickly thronged once more. Corey stepped to a veranda and rolled a cigarette by the stream of lamplight issuing through a window. He became aware that others, too, were lingering. As they advanced, he recognized Jason, Trace, Baker—and Shawnessy.

Trace grinned. "You two ready to take up where you left off?" he queried.

Corey started for him, jaw thrusting out. But Shawnessy intervened.

"Forget it, friend," he said. "'Tis too small his kind is to understand the likes of you an' me."

"You mean you're willing to forget it?" demanded Corey in surprise. "You're not holding a grudge?"

The Irishman shrugged. "That was whisky talking a while ago, not my naturally kind and lovin' nature. I'm sober now. Besides—" he grinned, rubbing his jaw—"any man who can wallop Tim Shawnessy off his feet is man enough for Tim Shawnessy to work under any time. Holy Mother! My jaw feels like it's been shoved under me left ear!"

Jason whooped and slapped Corey on the back. "You'll do, son!" he exclaimed. "Hope you don't hold no hard feelings over us rushin' you to the test. It would of happened anyway."

He was right. Shawnessy would have challenged him without prodding the first time they met.

Corey said, "No hard feelings."

Instantly Baker and Trace pressed forward to shake his hand and pledge their future support. "You won't have no trouble hiring muleskinners now, soon as there's wagons ready to roll!" declared Trace exuberantly. "This calls for a celebration. Back to the Border Rest, boys! The drinks are on me!"

But Corey shook his head. "Another time. I'm going down to the wagon yard and turn in. Good night, gentlemen."

Nodding, he walked away. Shawnessy called out and hurried after him. "I'll keep you company a ways," he said. "Me bed and board's at that end of town, too."

"Glad to have you," said Corey.

For moments they swung along together, unspeaking, the wood sidewalk resounding with the tramp of the Irishman's heavy shoes and the click of Corey's boot heels. They were the only ones abroad now. As though making up for lost time, the din emanating from each saloon seemed to shake the air. Horses stood with drooping heads at hitchracks. A dog, skulking in shadows, sat on its haunches and lifted a quavering cry.

Corey said, "You were with one of the raided wagon trains, Tim?"

"That I was."

"Tell me about it."

THEY CAME to the end of the block and turned down a side street. With no buildings facing upon it, it was illumined only by moonlight. Here there was no sidewalk. As they slowed their pace over rough ground, the Irishman shrugged.

"There's not much to tell," he said. "The devils swooped down on us like Injuns—with no warning whatever. A full twenty of them there was. I saw no more, for right off a bullet parted my scalp just like my mother—God rest her soul—used to part my hair every Sunday morning. I've got a scar clear across the top of me head to prove it!"

"Then you don't know any more about the raiders than what you've been told."

"I know they're sneakin', dirty snakes!" retorted the Irishman. "We were all found—dead an' wounded alike—stripped down to our underwear. Can you picture any man low enough to steal another man's pants right off him whilst he lies helpless?" His voice quivered with indignation. "And they'll pay for that if ever I get my two hands on them!"

He went on, denouncing the raiders with the choicest phrases of a sulphurous muleskinner's vocabulary. And Corey grinned at the unconscious, incongruous humor contained in his rage. He had escaped having his brains blown out by the slimmest of margins. Yet his ire was most aroused by the affront that had been dealt his dignity—the theft of his pants.

"Was that the first wagon train attacked?" he inquired.

"Yes. I spent a month flat on my back—Tim Shawnessy, the toughest—next to yourself, darlin'—the toughest damn—"

Breaking off, the Irishman halted in the middle of a stride and caught hold of Corey's arm. They were nearing the mouth of an alley that was penetrated by moonlight only to the depth of a few feet. Beyond, the darkness lay black and inpenetrable.

"What is it?" said Corey.

The Irishman did not reply. Instead he made a sudden lunge and his shoulder slammed into Corey with the force of a boulder hurtling down a mountainside. Corey felt the tug of his hat leaving his head as he went down. Simultaneously a gun roared. Aware of an orange flash in the dark maw of the alley, he hit the ground. And as he rolled over, clawing sand to regain his feet, two more reports rang out. Corey glimpsed the Irishman, half-crouched, making fiery reply to the bushwhacker's attack. Then Shawnessy leaped aside, taking cover behind the corner of a near adobe wall.

"Duck!" he yelled frantically to Corey.

But no further shots came from the alley. Instead a sudden loud noise sounded from its depth—the clattering crash of an overturned rubbish can.

"He's lighting out!" yelled the Irishman.

Corey said swiftly, "I'll go in here after

him! You circle back to the street and try to cut him off!"

Instantly the Irishman took off, running. Gun in hand, Corey moved into the alley. A second rattle of tin cans carried back from some distance ahead. This time, hampered by darkness, the would-be killer would not so easily make his escape. Alert for the opening of a back door, Corey sped forward. He blundered into a trash pile himself. Instantly he threw himself flat and rolled away.

But the noise drew no blast of gunfire. Presently he arose and went on. As his vision adjusted itself to darkness, he made faster, quieter progress. Without having flushed his quarry, he peered at length into a second side street as deserted as the one at the other end.

Disappointment began to gnaw at him. Had the bushwacker headed for a back street instead of the main one, as both he and Shawnessy had taken for granted?

Corey turned back. And as he paused once more to listen, he caught the sound of hurried footsteps moving alleyward down the nearest between-building space. It could be Shawnessy completing a fruitless circle to rejoin him. Or it could be the bushwhacker driven to a hasty retreat by the Irishman's appearance on the main street.

Taking cover behind an adobe corner, Corey waited. Quickly the scuffing tread of boots drew near. Above it he heard the sound of labored breathing. "Tim?" he called out guardedly.

HIS ANSWER was a startled exclamation. A sixgun barked and chips flew from the adobe corner inches to his right. Corey dropped flat and rolled clear of the wall. As he moved, he glimpsed a dark, half-crouching figure from which burst orange flashes of gunfire. He squeezed trigger himself—once—twice—and abruptly the orange flashes ceased. Briefly the shape of the enemy gunman was a motionless blob of shadow. Then a soft thump told of a gun falling from nerveless fingers. Almost soundlessly the shadow sank to the ground and moved no more.

Corey climbed to his feet with the droning echo of gunfire fading in his ears. For the first time he became aware of shouts slicing through the night air. Somewhere a horse whinnied. And then once more the tread of running feet sounded in the passageway down which the fallen gunman had rushed to meet the fate he had planned for another. This time Shawnessy's voice rang out, sharp with concern.

"Corey!"

"All right!" the latter sang out reassuringly.

A moment later the Irishman joined him, breathing heavily. "The son of Satan popped out of this passageway just as I rounded the corner into the street," he explained between gasping breaths. "He spotted me an' ducked back. Afraid of bein' recognized, likely. Let's have a look at his face."

While Corey found matches in a pocket and struck one, Shawnessy turned the huddled body over. Eyes mirroring life and intelligence gazed up at them. The match guttered out. Swiftly Corey dropped to one knee and struck another.

"Should have finished you . . . in the desert . . ." whispered the fallen gunman. "Shouldn't have . . . listened to . . ." His head dropped sideways.

"Is he dead?" queried the Irishman.

Mechanically Corey sought a heartbeat. There was none. The bushwhacker was dead, all right. His last words had branded him one of the two human buzzards who had robbed and left Corey to die in the desert two months ago. Afraid that Corey might learn his identity, he had taken the logical step of his kind to protect himself. This realization was no surprise. The thing that jolted Corey was the fact that he was Ross Arlidge, Holly's brother-in-law and business partner.

"What did he mean about finishing you in the desert?" said the Irishman.

But his voice, alive with curiosity, made no impression upon Corey. Dimly he had noted a break in the busy hum of the town. The exchange of gunfire between Shawnessy and the bushwhacker had been sufficient to draw Escala citizens out-of-doors once

more. Now, guided by the second round of shots, running footsteps were heading this way. As those in the lead slowed, Corey rose to his feet.

"It's all right, boys!" he called out. "The shooting's over."

The newcomers surged forward, then. As their numbers swelled, a babble of questions and comments arose. Someone struck a match and, when it guttered out, cursed the darkness.

"Does anybody know of a lantern handy?" inquired Corey.

One was located in a nearby shed. By the time its murky light enabled the gathering to identify the dead man, giving rise to a new flurry of exclamations and remarks, Marshal Lott had pushed his way to the center of the group. He knelt and made his own examination of the body.

Rising to his feet, he said tersely, "Who did it?"

Corey beat the garrulous Shawnessy to speech. "I did," he said, and told all that had happened.

Lott said to Shawnessy, "Do you back up that story?"

"It's the truth!" stated the Irishman vehemently. "You'll find Corey's hat with a bullet hole in it back at the end of the alley where the dirty scum laid for him. So anxious was he that he poked his gun out a mite too far. The gleam of moonlight on its barrel caught my eye an' I knocked Corey out of the way. It's lucky I've the eyes of a hawk an' the quickness of lightning, or 'tis Corey himself you'd be standin' over now—"

The marshal interrupted. "You can tell your story later with fancy trimmings. Right now I just want plain facts."

AN INJURED LOOK appeared on the Irishman's face. As it changed to indignation, Corey spoke quickly.

"He gave you plain facts, Marshal. Arlidge would have got me sure but for Tim's quick action. And we'd never have met and shot it out here, if Tim hadn't chased him back this way."

"Check their guns," suggested an onlooker.

By the time that was done to Lott's satisfaction, an obliging individual returned with Corey's hat. The twin holes bored through its crown settled the matter.

"Just one thing more," said the lawman. "I heard somebody took a potshot at you in the hotel this afternoon. Appears now that must of been Arlidge, too. Why was he so anxious to rub you out, Corey?"

Corey saw no reason to conceal the truth. Besides, Arlidge's desert companion might still be in town. And to make known the fact that he hadn't the slightest suspicion of his identity could be the best insurance against a second bushwhacking attempt.

Corey said, "Tim, repeat Arlidge's last words."

The Irishman obliged. "Arlidge said, 'Should of finished you in the desert. Shouldn't of listened to—' an' then he was gone."

"What did he mean?" said Lott.

Corey described his desert ordeal of two months ago, omitting only the fact that he had left behind in Sonora a great deal more gold than the sackful stolen from him.

"And you figure Arlidge was one of them two buzzards?" said Lott.

"His last words proved it. He thought I was hot on his trail and he had to get me before I got him."

The lawman thought that over. "Reckon you're right," he said at length. "How about his partner?"

Corey shrugged. "Maybe he's around, too. Or maybe he lit out."

The lawman gazed searchingly into Corey's eyes. Then he said, "I guess that's your worry. Mine right now is breaking the news to Holly. Don't expect she'll be exactly grieved, but it's bound to be a shock. Some of you boys pack Arlidge's body over to the undertaker's, will you?"

Holly! A knot formed in Corey's stomach. Yet he knew that he must face her, and the sooner the better.

"Mind if I come along, Marshal?" he said.

Again he encountered a searching look. Lott checked a remark that sprang to his lips. "Suit yourself," he said instead, and turned away.

DESERT CACHE

Corey gripped Shawnessy's hand hard. "I've got plenty to say to you, Tim," he declared. "Wait for me in the Border Rest, will you?"

"That I will!" replied the Irishman heartily. "But it's no more drinking I'll do this night. His wits about him is what a man needs, when there's murdering snakes—"

As the rich Irish brogue faded behind him, a feeling of warmth flooded Corey. There are men who are friends from the moment their eyes and hands meet—men whom one shared adventure will make blood-brothers for life. Such a pair were he and Shawnessy. The big Irishman was the one compensating factor in a situation that might otherwise have proven unendurable.

COREY overtook the marshal as the latter mounted the hotel steps. A trio, peering out the front door, stepped back to permit them entrance. It was composed of a sallow-faced youth, obviously the night desk clerk, Holly Arlidge, and Charles Bruss. Sight of the latter standing at Holly's side dealt Corey an unpleasant jolt. However, he was given no time to ponder it.

"What was the shooting about, Marshal?" asked Holly.

The lawman's reply, not ungentle, was direct. "A gent tried to bushwhack Corey here and got himself killed instead. I'm sorry, Holly. It was Ross."

For a moment she stared blankly. "Ross!" she whispered. "Why would Ross —" As her voice failed, her eyes lifted to Corey's face. Her lips paled. "I heard about this afternoon," she faltered. "Was that—Ross, too?"

"It seems likely," answered Corey. "Unless you can alibi him for that time?"

She shook her head. "No. We talked only a few minutes. He was sitting in my office when I went to see Henry and ask him to come to work early. I—I had a headache and wanted to lie down."

"And I walked back here with her,"

[*Turn page*]

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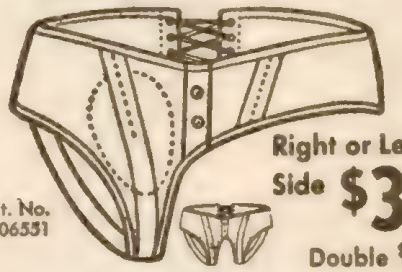

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volunteered the clerk. "There wasn't nobody around except a couple of fellows talking about somebody shooting at somebody upstairs."

"Why should Ross have wanted to kill you, Dave?" said Holly. "You were strangers . . ."

"Not exactly," interrupted Corey.

The marshal said, "You two have met before?"

He had not missed Holly's familiar use of Corey's first name. There was little he would miss in any situation, decided Corey. He tensed, awaiting Holly's answer.

She gave it unemotionally. "We grew up together. But it's eight years since we saw each other last. I met Tom and Ross only six years ago, so I can't see how there could be any connection."

"It's like this . . ." interrupted Corey. Once more he told what had taken place in the desert. Holly's pale lips grew paler.

When he had finished, she whispered, "For a sack of gold—"

"Plenty of Border scum would do it for less," said the lawman. "It's just hard to believe of someone you knew and maybe kind of liked."

Holly reached for the door jamb, and Corey saw the knuckles of her slim fingers whiten. She was fighting desperately to maintain composure. Abruptly he realized that, though shocked, she was not incredulous. She was accepting his story without a question. Did she possess some knowledge that fitted into the details of it, making proof unnecessary? Something she would not reveal unless pressed—and then probably not before witnesses?

The marshal said, "I had the body taken to the undertaker's. You can see about funeral arrangements tomorrow, can't you?"

It seemed to Corey that she had to bring her mind back from a great distance. "Yes," she said. "Thanks, Marshal, for everything."

"Glad to do what I can. Good night, Holly . . . Corey . . . Mr. Bruss."

His departure created a strained silence. The youthful clerk retreated to the desk. Finally Corey spoke.

"May I come in for a moment, Holly? I'd like a talk with you."

After a slight hesitation she said, "Come along," and, taking Charles Bruss's arm, she started to walk across the lobby with him.

Corey stiffened. "I want to talk with you alone," he said. "It's important."

The couple halted. Looking back, Holly said evenly, "Mr. Bruss is my guest and very good friend. You may speak freely in front of him."

She was saying flatly that she would not spend a moment alone with him. Just in time Corey checked an impulse to spit out, "Never mind!" and storm away. That could be exactly what she wanted him to do.

"If that's the way you want it," he said instead.

HE HAD the satisfaction of detecting a glint of dismay in her eyes. But her small, square jaw took on a familiar, stubborn angle. Silently she led the way through her office to a room beyond.

Corey noted only that it was a comfortably furnished living room. A small table set with candles and fresh flowers took his eye. At it a cozy dinner for two had been eaten. Bruss sauntered forward and helped himself to a bonbon from a silver dish. Nibbling the sweet, he sank down upon a sofa and stretched out his legs in the manner of one completely at home.

Holly did not offer Corey a chair or seat herself. "What do you want to talk about?" she demanded.

A gleaming red stone hung from a delicate chain about her neck and there were matching gleams of red at each ear lobe. Her arms and shoulders were bare and snowy white. She was gowned and jeweled as generations of the women of her family had gowned and jeweled themselves for the grandest of fiestas in Mexico City, or balls at the governor's mansion in Austin. And it was all for the benefit and pleasure of Charles Bruss. That was the point she wanted to drive home. That was why she had brought him here to her personal quarters.

Corey said, "Why did you find my story of the shooting so easy to believe?"

Her gaze wavered, and Corey guessed the truth. She feared the questions he might ask. That was why she had flaunted her intimacy with Bruss in his face. She had hoped to stir his jealous anger and so distract and outmaneuver him.

"Did you know what Arlidge had done two months ago?" he demanded.

"No!" There was horror in her denial.

"Then why?"

"Ross returned from El Paso about that time. This afternoon he wanted to borrow money to go away again. He owes me a large sum already because of gambling losses. And when he leaves, I have to run the saloon, which I hate. He wouldn't tell me where he had to go and why, so I turned him down. I told him this was one jam he'd have to get out of by himself—" She swallowed painfully. "I thought it was just a new gambling loss. But when Marshal Lott broke the news a while ago, I realized it must have been you he'd wanted to get away from—"

She swayed.

Bruss jumped to his feet and put an arm about her. "Can't you see she's had enough for tonight!" he cried.

"I'm all right, Charles," protested Holly. "And I want this settled." Remaining in the circle of the Big West man's arm, she looked at Corey again. "I knew then he'd done something to you," she said. "Something so terrible that without money to take him far away in a hurry, he'd believed that killing you was his only way out."

It was a logical explanation. Anyone might have reasoned that way. Why, then, should he still feel dissatisfied?

Corey said, "Who came back to Escala with Arlidge two months ago?"

"No one. I saw him ride into town myself."

That figured, too, admitted Corey. Since the business of Arlidge and his traveling companion had obviously been of a shady nature, it was likely that they would part and enter town separately. Perhaps after-

[*Turn page*]

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wards they had even pretended not to know each other.

"Can you think of any stranger who showed up about the same time?"

Holly frowned, as though trying to remember. But Bruss gave an impatient shrug. "Strangers drift in and out of Escala constantly," he said. "Unless something happens to call particular attention to them, they're hardly noticed."

Grudgingly Corey gave up. Although a feeling of dissatisfaction persisted, there was nothing more he could do.

"Reckon you're right," he said. "The next move is up to Arlidge's partner. Good night, Holly—and thanks."

She made no reply, nor did she accompany him to the door. As he closed it behind him, he glanced back. Bruss had his head bent close to hers and was speaking rapidly. In that moment they looked more like conspirators than lovers.

Corey's teeth came together. It could be. For the hundredth time he strove to recall the exact words of Arlidge's desert companion. Something about demanding respect from his associates, if he was expected to work for the interests of Arlidge's people against—Arlidge had interrupted there.

But Arlidge had been Holly's brother-in-law and business partner, and tonight her intimacy with Charles Bruss had been revealed. Looked at from that angle, a picture emerged clearly. Arlidge's people could be none other than Big West, which would make the small mine owners Big West sought to break the ones his unknown companion meant to work against.

It was as simple, and as complicated, as that. Simple because Bruss was already fixed in his mind as the enemy he had to defeat for Ellen Worth in order to become his own man again. Complicated because Holly must not be made to suffer at his hands again. Yet he was now convinced that she, too, was involved in the struggle that was about to take place—and on Bruss's side.

SHAWNESSY rolled Corey out in the morning. "The other small mine owners talked with Neale after leaving us last night," he announced. "Neale's going to Pima City to buy mules an' new ore an' supply wagons fer the lot of them. He picked me amongst the skinners to go along. Things'll be buzzin' around here soon."

He was right. When they came back from breakfast, saddled horses bearing blanket rolls and canteens stood in front of the office shack. In the blacksmith shop a man wearing a smith's leather apron was kindling a fire in the forge, upwards of ten men standing about, watching.

"I'll make you acquainted with the boys," said Shawnessy. And Corey was shaking hands all around when Neale called him into the office.

"We'll be gone about a week," Neale said, waving Corey to a seat. "By the time we get back I want you to have every wagon outside ready to roll. Jason and the others have a few mules left. They'll be stabled here nights. I want guards posted at all times." Neale leaned forward, thrusting out his underjaw. "Our cash is limited," he said grimly. "We can't buy nearly as many mules and wagons as we need. That means every one we've got is vitally important. If a fire should sweep the wagon yard some night, it could cripple us beyond recovery."

"I'll post guards," Corey assured him. "But I doubt if Bruss is ready to pull anything right here in town. You'd better be careful. Especially on the way back from Pima City."

"We're not going to Pima City," said Neale. "We'll head that way, but circle to Douglas instead. If Bruss sends a party to ambush us, they'll wait to the north while we manage to slip in safe and sound from the east."

"Sounds all right. Let's hope Bruss doesn't get wise."

"He won't," retorted Neale. "Even the men going along won't know until we switch directions. I'm not taking any chances."

Corey wondered why he was being told, when so much else had been withheld. Then Neale's smug expression told him why. Neale wanted to show off his talent for strategy and flaunt anew the fact that,

where Ellen worth and her interests were concerned, he was top man.

Corey rose abruptly. "If that's all—"

Neale spoke as he opened the door. "One more thing, Corey. You had a busy night. Remember you're working for *Dos Cedros* now, and for a woman to whom you owe a lot. Don't forget to place her interests above your personal vendettas."

Corey said, "In other words, I'm not to go looking for Arlidge's partner. I hadn't intended to. But if he tries what Arlidge did—"

"Defend yourself, by all means!" Neale's tone became sardonic. "And may you be as lucky as you were last night—all around!"

The last two words referred to Shawnessy. Abruptly Corey realized that Neale must have known Shawnessy had been promised the job of wagon boss. He'd known that any man put over the big Irishman would have to fight him for the privilege of remaining there. But he had uttered no warning. Much as Ellen Worth might need the services of Dave Corey, it had been Neale's secret hope that Shawnessy would beat his head off.

Corey squared about. "We may not like each other, but we've got to pull together!" he said. "So why don't you stop nursing a grudge like a green kid?"

Neale looked stunned. Then he surged to his feet with a choking cry. "Blast you—"

A feminine voice cut in. "Are you two quarreling? What about?"

ELLEN WORTH entered, gazing from one to the other with wide eyes. She wore a white dress and a wide-brimmed, flowered hat.

Staring at her, Neale forgot his anger. "You're not ready!" he exclaimed.

"I'm not going," she replied. "Father says it would be too hard on me, and he's right. I'd only be in the way."

Neale shot Corey an ugly look. "You can go!" he snapped.

Corey departed leisurely. Bertram Worth was right. The trip to Douglas would be no

[*Turn page*]

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kind of trip for a woman to make unnecessarily. Neale must know that. Yet he would rather Ellen undertook it than leave her behind subject to possible attentions from Dave Corey.

"Wonder if she'll give in and go," murmured Corey. "Bet she doesn't."

He was right. Fifteen minutes later the mount intended for the girl was left standing, when Neale and the men of his choice swung aboard the others. Ellen waved good-by from the office doorway.

"Good luck, Ted, and be careful!" she called out.

Neale pulled his hat down with an ill-tempered jerk and spurred his horse. Shouts of farewell followed the party to the gate. Holding up there, Shawnessy yelled to Corey.

"Sure, an' don't let yerself get bushwacked whilst I'm gone or I'll beat your brains out! Watch your back!"

Both Ross Arlidge and Jack Farley were buried that afternoon. In the evening Corey drifted aimlessly from one saloon to another, looking on, drinking little. Passing the hotel at length, his step slowed involuntarily. In the same fashion his glance sought the desk through the open doorway. There was no one behind it. Henry, the night clerk, must be busy elsewhere at the moment, and Holly was probably with Bruss again. Cursing silently, Corey started on.

And then a voice called out. "Dave!"

A chair creaked in a corner of the shadowed veranda. Holly walked to the top of the steps.

Corey shoved back his hat. Wondering and on guard, he waited for her to speak.

Finally she said, "You've changed, Dave."

"So have you," he replied.

"And not in a way you like?"

He said painfully, "I forfeited the right to judge you long ago."

Her gaze dropped. "You sound like Tullery. He says no human being ever has the right to judge another."

"Tullery was too charitable to be a sheriff. He should have been a preacher." Corey hesitated, then added, "One of his letters caught up with me. He said you'd sold the ranch to a rich Englishman soon after your marriage. It's hard to picture that sort as master of the Castillo hacienda."

Holly smiled faintly. "That's how the whole country felt when Mercedes Castillo married Sean Dennis Shane, fresh from County Cork."

"But your father became a *hidalgo* to do the Castillos proud."

"Yes. Remember how he fretted because I turned out more Irish tomboy than haughty señorita? And remember—"

Pain gripped Corey as she talked on, recalling a time when the years stretching ahead of them both had seemed as bright as the sun. As the floodgates of memory opened, she forgot the tragedy that had torn them apart, it seemed.

Then she said, "I couldn't stand it after a while. I began to see you and Mike everywhere. That's why I sold the ranch. Tom liked excitement and being on the move anyway. Settling down with a business here in Escala was my idea. I doubt if it would have lasted if he had lived."

AS THOUGH by its own power, the question Corey knew he had no right to ask issued from his lips. "Were you happy with Tom Arlidge, Holly?"

For a moment he thought she would not answer. Then she said in a low voice. "I suppose I should say yes. But lying seems futile and foolish. Tom had looks and charm, but he was weak and unscrupulous. He went through most of my inheritance. He drank too much. And he always accused me of having married him just to get away from Verde and to forget some other man. Only one thing kept me from leaving him. He was right."

"Holly—" said Corey unsteadily.

The veranda was dark and deserted. Suddenly the busy hum of the town seemed dim and far away.

"He was right, Dave," continued Holly. "I tried to use him to blot out all memory of the past—and you. But it didn't work."

In the moonlight her cheeks were wet. "Holly!" whispered Corey again.

Suddenly both memory and reason were

swept away. She came into his arms, lifting her lips to his. For one world-spinning moment she was all melting surrender. Then she wrenched her head aside and began to push against him with all her strength.

"It's no use!" she sobbed. "I can't hate you any more. I'd give anything if we could start over again—together! But we can't. There's three of us here—you and I—and Mike! There always will be—anytime we meet!"

Corey let her go, reaction sending a hot, searing wave through him. Bitterness followed. For this Holly, mature and even more desirable than the old, was a stranger to him. Others had new and stronger claims upon her now. Bruss, for instance.

A picture flashed into Corey's mind. Bruss and a cozy dinner for two in Holly's private rooms. Bruss throwing himself down upon Holly's sofa as though he owned everything in sight, including Holly herself.

Corey said harshly, "Are you sure the third party is a ghost? Are you sure it's not Charles Bruss?"

"You've no right—"

"Forget it!" Corey's blaze of jealousy was smothered out by hopelessness. He turned away.

She stopped him. "You don't like Charles Bruss, do you? And it's more than because you think he and I— What is it?"

She would be hard to fool. Maybe a half-truth would do the trick.

"You're right," he said. "I wouldn't like any man you favored. But I've overheard talk, too. A lot of miners claim Bruss is a slave-driver, and not above cheating them on pay when he can get away with it."

He expected her to bridle in the Big West man's defense. She bit her lip instead.

"I've heard such talk, too," she said reluctantly. "But it's hard to believe."

"Are you trying to make out you don't know anything about Bruss's private doings?" asked Corey scornfully.

She stiffened. "Why should I know any-

[*Turn page*]

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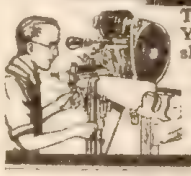

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thing? Although he wants to marry me, I've not yet consented. And contrary to other gossip you've probably heard, I'm not his mistress, either!"

That she might be gossiped about had not occurred to Corey. Now he realized it was inevitable. The widow of a gambler and saloonkeeper, she was continuing to run his business. And the attentions she accepted from Bruss were far from discreet.

Still angry, Corey said, "If you're not Bruss's woman, why make it look as though you are?"

A bitter smile crept about her lips. "Ellen Worth would slap your face for that and convince you of her lily-white virtue," she said in a curious tone. "I put such kittenish ways aside long ago. You can believe or not believe anything you like about me, Dave. I don't care either way!"

COREY stared after her as she swept into the hotel and out of sight. Then, swearing, he strode to the nearest saloon, entered and pushed his way up to the bar. Gradually, after he'd had a drink, the savageness of his mood began to abate. He saw Bertram Worth in the crowd, half-drunk, and pressing acquaintances for treats at the bar. Apparently his mooching would be put up with just so far, for his requests were shrugged off. He reached the point of watching others drink with so stark a look of craving on his face that at last, in sheer pity, Corey bought a quart of Scotch and procured two glasses. Holding his purchase aloft, he beckoned Worth to a table.

Inexplicably, the latter hesitated. But his thirst proved too strong. Within an hour, while Corey looked on, he emptied the bottle. Corey learned many things. The stage driver's account of Ellen Worth's history had been accurate enough as to facts. Bertram Worth had been a college professor with five degrees. It rankled him deep inside that he had not been entrusted with the management of the *Dos Cedros* Mine. It was a source of humiliation that Ellen, and not he, controlled the family purse strings.

Yet he spoke of the girl with genuine affection in his voice. Having himself experienced the irksomeness of being helplessly dependent upon a woman's bounty, Corey felt a strong wave of masculine sympathy for the graceless old toper. When he passed out at length, Corey shouldered his gangling form easily and packed him home.

Ellen received them coldly. "I'll see that this doesn't happen again for a long time," she said, tight-lipped. "Thank you for fetching him home."

But she wasn't grateful. She was coldly furious and ashamed. Humiliated because a mere hired hand had brought home the man she called "father" in such a condition? Hell! thought Corey.

In a restless, disgusted mood he made his way back towards the main street. As he approached the corner, he noticed a light in the Big West office. He had taken only a few more steps, when the light went out.

Corey paused involuntarily. A man emerged from a side door and locked it behind him. When he turned and walked in Corey's direction, an instinctive urge to caution prompted the latter to melt into the cover of a between-building space. Despite darkness, the man's silhouette established his identity. Charles Bruss. He turned into an alley above Corey's hiding place. Corey waited, but he did not re-appear. Where had he gone? What was his destination that he must choose a route through back alleys to reach it?

A wave of curiosity and excitement prompted Corey to enter the alley himself. It was too dark to see more than a foot or two ahead. Corey endeavored to avoid noisy contact with trash piles by keeping to the center of the narrow lane and moving slowly. Without mishap he reached the end of the block. The second side street into which he peered contained no sign of life. Across it, however, the alley continued on towards the Border and Old Escala.

A powerful hunch hit Corey. At this late hour and in this stealthy fashion, Bruss could only be on his way to a secret meeting with his below-Border hirelings. Fired by speculation, Corey pressed on.

Luck was with him. When he reached the wide, open space marking the interna-

tional line, he sighted his quarry once more. In the light of a waning moon, Bruss stood with a straw-sombreroed, *serraped* figure on the Mexican side.

Then both figures turned and entered the Mexican village. As soon as they had passed from sight, Corey hurried after them. Rounding a corner, he peered down a narrow, crooked street. A single horse stood at a hitchrack. Nearby a yoke of oxen dozed before a *carreta* piled high with mesquite firewood. Here there was no noise and bustle. Only the tinkle of a guitar issued from a *cantina*.

". . . Y tu belleza seré esplendor . . ."

Mechanically the Spanish words of the tune formed in Corey's mind, while his eyes darted about, seeking the pair he followed. He located them with difficulty, for they were not proceeding openly to their destination. Instead, they too hugged the shadows pooled darkly in the lee of walls. Carefully the Mexican scouted each open space before beckoning Bruss to follow him across it.

Even on Mexican soil, stealth must attend Bruss's meetings with his Mexican accomplices!

(To be continued in the next issue)

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 57)

1. A horse that humps up or acts touchy about saddleblanket and saddle when being saddled up is said to have a cold back. Many such horses are otherwise gentle and do not buck.

2. False. By far the majority of Herefords are horned, but there is also a breed of polled Herefords.

3. Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Gray Eagle, Roman Nose.

4. New Mexico, at Albuquerque.

5. Dally, dolly, dolly welter, dally-vuelta, dally-vuelt. The original Spanish is *dále vuelta* (DAH-lay VWALE-tah), literally meaning "give it a turn."

6. Beaver.

7. Lassen Volcanic National Park.

8. That he had thrown his steer in the bulldogging or steer wrestling contest in eight seconds.

9. Gambling: Las Vegas, Nevada. Rodeo: Las Vegas, New Mexico.

10. Las Vegas, properly pronounced Lahss VAY-gahss, means "the meadows."

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WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

by Professor MARCUS MARI

THE GIRL OF ARIES
MARCH 21—APRIL 20

OF ALL the forty-eight states, only Louisiana can share your birthday with you. That territory was admitted into the Union on April 8, 1812. But a great many other events have taken place under the star-sign of Aries. You share your birth-date with the first shot that was fired at Fort Sumter (April 12, 1861), the shot that set off the War between the States; and with the end of that war, on April 9th, when Lee surrendered. A good many of the world's most famous men and women were born under this powerful sign.

They all had one thing in common—a driving ambition. Often the girls born under Aries are not consciously aware of possessing this trait.

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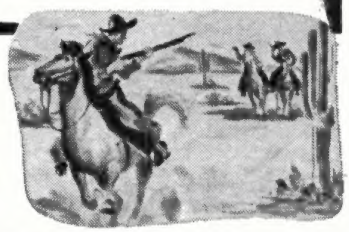

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